hear me out..2

another tumblr sexyman zine

How Bad Can It Be?

MILKMAN

Although *Hear Me Out* is an independent project,
we of the zine team have relied on the *Sexypedia Wiki* as a list and typology of fandom sexymen as early on as our first edition's interest check.

On October 25th 2024, FANDOM Wikia shut down the *Sexypedia Wiki.*

It has since migrated over to the wiki hosting site **'Miraheze'**.

We encourage anyone who enjoys this zine to visit, support and contribute to the *new home* of the Sexypedia!

hear me out..2

a tumblr sexyman zine

Cover.....1
Dedication.....4
Navigation table.....5

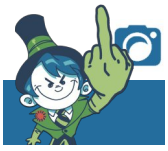
Content index.....6
Content.....13
Merch showcase.....221

Credits.....227

Contents

Visual Fic Spoilers Gore

Irusu #grand admiral thrawn #star wars p14


Clara Kay #various #'sexyman high' p15-16

small illustration by: Paul

Ellory #pauline #rosalina #mario series p17-27

HeBe #luigi #various #mario series p28

tooblindtizzy #waluigi #mario series p29

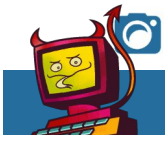
LittleR0b1n #bill cipher #stan pines #gravity falls p30

Feenie #maleficent #sleeping beauty p31

Ogo0d4 #bill cipher #gravity falls #alastor #hazbin hotel p32

small illustration by: Ghozt

Taruchinator #kinito #kinitoPET #y/n p33-40


Telebotz #various #'robots' p41-42

NinooTNY #gary the gadget guy #club penguin p43-44

p45-57 #transformers #starscream Paul

p58 #phineas and ferb #doofenshmirtz Lynn

p59 #mass effect #garrus vakarian Dreamaruu

p60-73 #bloodborne #lady maria HopeStoryteller

p74 #touhou 7 #yuyuko saigyouji ufokia

p75 #faith #john ward falterview

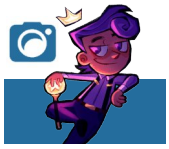
p76 #fate grand order #oberon ronanxing

p77 #hades #hypnos PropertyOfHog

p78 #critical role #caleb #essek Hannah Spoons

small illustration by: Paul

p79-89 #sofia the first #cedric blitz

p90 #the fairly oddparents #peri Berri 

p91-92 #team fortress 2 #the spy eggsy
eggsy #benny #fallout p93-94

small illustration by: Victor Hannibal

Muffy #.GIFfany #gravity falls p95-104

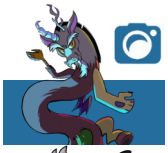
Blue #various #'sexywomen' p105

hyun #merlin #fate grand order p106

Fictional Reality #rei sakuma #enstars p107

Starix #goro majima #like a dragon p108

Feenie #bowser #mario series p109


Shakooo #discord #mlp #bill cipher #gravity falls p110

small illustration by: Aether

blitz #wilfre #drawn to life p111-122

mariibeann #spoilers #ai the somnium files p123

Hannah Spoons #sanji #mihawk #one piece #buggy the clown p124

atlas occam #saul goodman #breaking bad #atticus finch #to kill a mocking bird p125

Victor Hannibal #herbert west #re-animator #victor frankenstein #frankenstein p126

p127-128 #limbus comapny #yi sang Lad

p129 #that's not my neighbour #milkman falterview

p130-143 #ace attorney #franziska von karma HopeStoryteller

p144 #hazbin hotel #valentino #velvette #vox Skunkoon

p145-146 #night vale #cecil palmer Millea Erell

p147 #final fantasy 7 #sephiroth Irusu

small illustration by: Ghozt

p148-158 #y/n #dungeon meshi #senshi Icy

p159 #'rabbits' #various Ghozt

p160 #total drama #chris mclean tooblindtizzy

p161-162 #total drama #chris mclean #inanimate insanity #mephone4 NinooTNY

small illustration by: Lira (X/twitter pakutheta)

p163-169 #zero escape #santa #akane Sunlight

p170 #danganronpa #nagito komaeda Aether

p171-172 #magnus archives #michael shelley calatarii
sabimila #various p173-174

So #ingo #pokémon legends p175

experimentaldragonfire #apollo justice #ace attorney p176-187

Cicadraa #daroach #kirby p188

DarkRainfire #scourge #warrior cats p189

MARLOWEMEMO #spoilers #ace attorney i2 p190

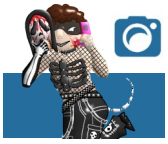
Paul #kedamono #papi #popee the performer p191-203

applesteinie #garry #ib p204

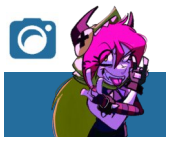
Kara #normal guy #elevator hitch p205

small illustration by: Paul
Taruchinator #max goof #goofy movie #bradley uppercrust III p206-216

Beabzebub #skeletor #masters of the universe p217


Millea Erell #ghostface #scream p218

p219-220 #villainous #dementia #+various **Shakooo**

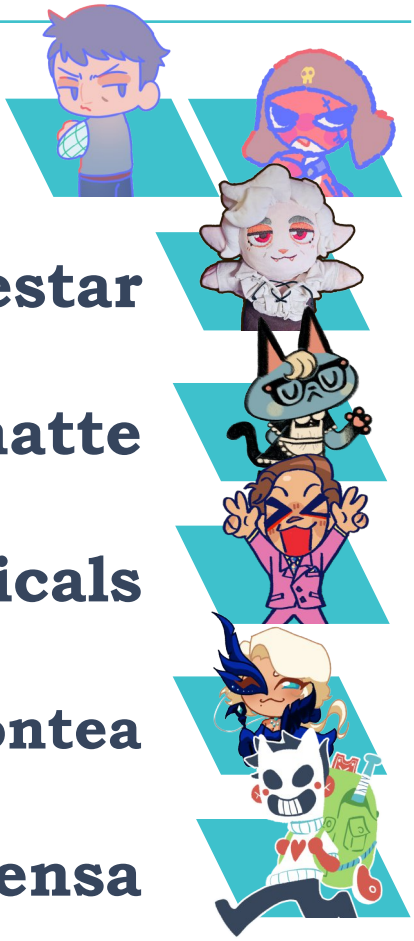


p221 #the onceler #the lorax **MIRU677**

Merch Showcase - p222

p222 #sgt. frog #girogo #adventure time #the winter king #stardew valley #shane #my time at portia's #higgins **Uukipi**

p223 #baldur's gate #astarion #adventure time #princess bubblegum #animal crossing #petri #soul eater #steins #ok ko #prof. venomous **Tonestar** **ghostlymatte**



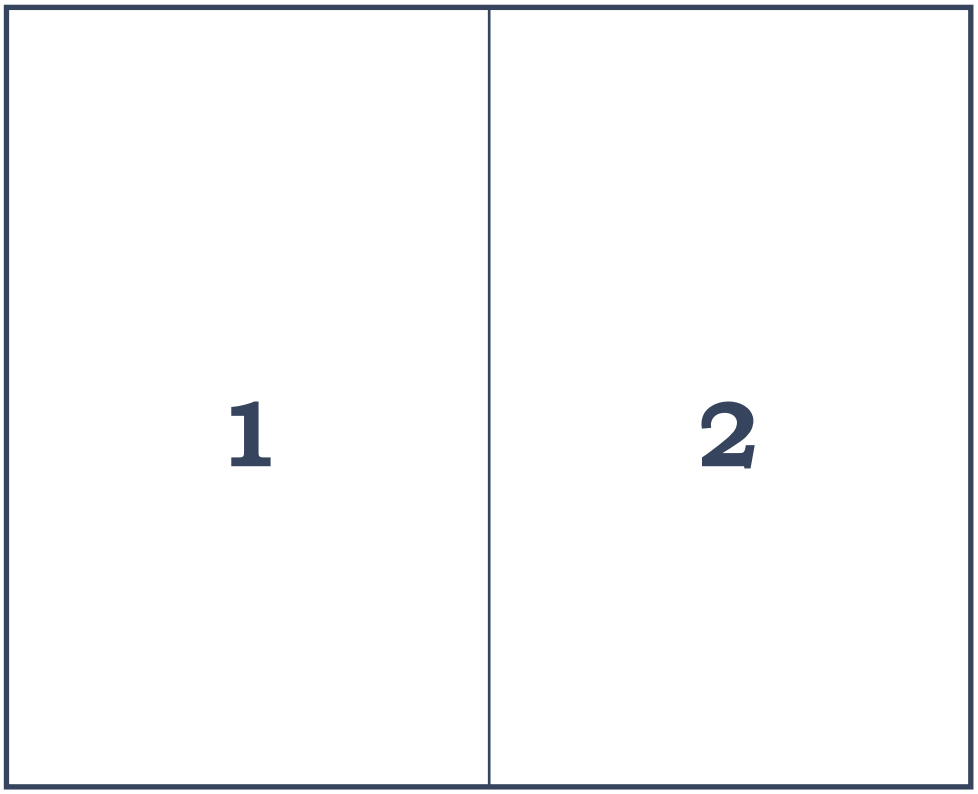
p224 #breaking bad #saul goodman **Rivericals**

p225 #shadow milk #roquefort #pitaya dragon #cookie run **vanillamoontea**

p227 #OFF #zacharie **Ravensa**

p1 *Cover Illustration* **Ceramic_avocado**

You are reading the *'Odd Spreads'* version of this PDF!



IRUSU 2021

BE YOUR SEXY SELF TODAY!
I WILL NOT STRIP OR SWEAR IN FRONT OF CHILDREN
TODAY'S LUNCH SPECIAL:
BRANDE FLAPPO WHIPPY WHAP
WITH AN EXTRA GUNK
OF CHUMBLE

SEXYMEN
GO COPPYCATS!
See me for DETENTION!!!
Dutch VanDer Linde
Stanley Pines
Jesse Pinkman
TODAY'S LESSON:
WHAT MAKES A SEXYMAN:
·LANKY?
·SUIT? TIE?
·PROFESSOR?
·VILLAIN?
GUEST SPEAKER THIS WEEK:
PRINCIPAL SANS
ATTN. ALL VILLAIN SEXYMEN:
DO NOT KILL OTHER STUDENTS WHILE YOU ARE IN CLASS!!!
WELCOME TO SEXYMAN HIGH!
HELLO HELLO?
MR. ONCE-LER
KICK ME!
HANG IN THERE!
WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS DON'T MAKE LEMONADE
MAKE LIFE TAKE THE LEMONS BACK!
GET MAD!
SEXY MAN OF THE MONTH
A-6969
A-6969

Once in A Lifetime Chance

#mario series #pauline #rosalina

Written by
Ellory

New Donk City is such a charming place. Though Rosalina has seen vast galaxies and planets in her lifetime, it's still a feat that humans can craft buildings to climb towards the atmosphere with their mere hands.

She usually doesn't come to visit this city. Rosalina had come down to attend a concert with her friend, mostly out of curiosity for what these events were like. There are a lot more people wandering around the streets than she's used to, even if this apparently is more than the usual foot traffic of New Donk City.

Apparently, the concert's lead songstress is well known around the world for her charming singing voice and witty wordplay in her music. Miss Pauline is an ambitious mayor who runs New Donk City during the day, but sweeps the hearts of many by night with her beautiful melodies.

Even though the show hasn't started yet, the day has been lovely so far. Peach and Rosalina spent most of it at the mall to find concert outfits at Peach's insistence. Rosalina had driven in one of them before in the local grand prix events, but never really had stopped to shop in one.

With a delicious lunch at the food court with some shopping right after, they find what they were there for. Rosalina plays it safe with a cute navy blue knee-length woolen dress with a white beret. Peach gets a darling pink and white gingham dress with white looped earrings. The two leave the mall in their new adorable fits, ready for the spectacular evening ahead.

Rosalina floats behind Princess Peach down the street as the sun sets, the two making their way to the venue. However, Princess Peach abruptly makes her way to a booth of something called boba tea.

Rosalina glances over at Peach with a bit of confusion. “Isn’t the show going to start soon? Why are we stopping here?”

“We’ll have time, don’t worry! I’m thirsty!” Peach explains as she points to the menu. “Come, I want to show you what this is. I think you’ll like it.”

Rosalina glances at some of the artwork. “Ah. I see. It’s a type of beverage.”

“Yep, that’s right! They’re super yummy. What would you like?”

“Hmm…” Rosalina tilts her head, pouting before reading the menu. She’s never heard of some of these combinations in

her life. “Do they have anything with that coconut fruit you showed me? I liked that a lot.”

“Yep!” Peach leans in and orders for the both of them. “Hey there! Can we get one Pink Dream and one Starry Night please?”

Rosalina doesn’t even know what those are, but Peach tends to have good taste. She’ll trust her word.

As they make their way to the side of the van waiting for their drinks, Peach leans against the truck with a smile. “You know, we should do this more often. You’re always so busy and it’s fun to shop with you.”

“Yeah. I’d love to.” Rosalina agrees. “Please let me know when you’d like to do this again.”

“Oh, let me check my schedule right now!” Peach takes out her phone and scrolls. After a minute of silence, Peach's attention is only on her screen, likely distracted by the many messages she’s been bombarded with throughout the day.

Rosalina observes her surroundings, trying to absorb all the parts of the city all at once, but something crimson catches her eye.

Well, no. Someone. Someone *beautiful.*

A tall brunette woman in a flashy, velvet red suit is speaking with someone right next to her. She beams a gorgeous smile before waving the gentleman off. Rosalina tries to be polite and avert her eyes, but she can't seem to look away from the beauty across from her.

There's quite a few impressive sights in New Donk City, but no structure can compare to this woman's beauty. Rosalina has never seen anything so eye-catching in all the galaxies she's traveled across-

"Hey, your order's ready!" Peach interrupts with a bright smile. Peach offers a tall, dark blue beverage with little yellow star jellies at the bottom. It's very adorable and matches the artwork well.

She takes it before taking a sip, a nice coconut flavor with some berry hits her tongue. She nods. "Mm. That is nice."

Oh, and I looked at my schedule. I'll have to do it next month, I'm pretty busy the rest of September."

Rosalina just gives a nod.

"Are you alright? You've been quiet."

"Oh, yes, I'm just a bit distracted. This place is more than I'm used to." Rosalina admits. "Thank you."

She takes another sip and enjoys the sweet drink,

absentmindedly letting her mind wander. She hums in delight with a smile, continuing to watch the stunning woman out of the corner of her eye leave in a limo.

“That is so good.” Peach exhales before glancing over. “How’s yours?”

“Different than what I usually have, but I like it.” Rosalina muses.

Peach is still rambling on about something, but Rosalina’s mind can’t seem to shake off the woman that she had just seen leave the compound. Who was she and will Rosalina see her again? Is she going to be going to the concert? Does Peach possibly know her?

No, probably not. The galaxy is a big place, after all. She’s seen a lot of sights around the vast galaxies and rarely sees a person more than once, especially one she’s never interacted with.

It’s a shame, really.

—

As the sun sets and the lights of New Donk City brighten the sky, Rosalina realizes why Peach has been so insistent on showing her its beauty. There’s a projection of some cute pixel art on the side of some buildings. The lights are different from

the abundance of stars, but it's still a striking beauty Rosalina never really had the time to absorb whenever she visits this planet.

Rosalina makes her way to her seat next to Peach as jazzy music echoes through the venue. Peach has continued to chat throughout the night and Rosalina intently listens to Peach's adventures and stories.

It's so charming what she's been up to. She had been traveling with a little tiara to explore all the sights the world had to offer...

Yet, in the back of her mind, there's that beautiful woman and her bright, charming smile. It's strange her heart is still musing about that other woman - it's not as if she'll see her again. Even so, her eyes glance around the audience, hoping that she'll find that mistress again. She's not sure if it'll even be possible with how many people are in attendance, but she can hope to glance at that beauty just one more time before she has to go back home to her precious lumas.

The venue's chatter quiets down when a trumpet starts to play, echoing through the entire venue as a way to silence the crowd.

Disappointed that she couldn't find the mystery woman

again, Rosalina decides to focus on what she came all the way down for. After all, she has been anticipating this performance for ages.

The lights in the venue dim before the stage lights up. Three gentlemen start a lovely, catching melody on their instruments. Two parts of the stage open and a woman rises from the ground. Her red, sparkly crimson dress twinkles with her brunette locks curled over her shoulder. Her brown eyes glow under the spotlight and Rosalina is completely awestruck at the sight.

There's no way. The woman she spotted earlier *is* the singer performing tonight.

***This* is Pauline?!**

The audience uproars in applause as the woman steps towards the microphone. She taps the device before leaning in and shouting, "New Donk City!"

Everyone cheers in response.

"Thank you for coming tonight! What a fabulous evening, isn't it?" Pauline glances around. "Are you ready?"

The crowd explodes into more applause and cheers, somehow louder than before. Rosalina herself even joins.

“Alright, let’s get this concert going!”

Pauline raises a hand as her musicians begin to play a heartwarming melody. A spotlight shines on the charming woman, light catching the sparkles on her dress and Rosalina’s heart *melts*.

Pauline begins to sing and the audience falls silent as if they were not shouting five minutes ago. Rosalina had no idea a concert venue could be so quiet. Pauline’s voice is angelic and gentle, flattering in every sense.

Rosalina *can’t* focus on anything else but the charming singer.

In what feels like mere moments, it’s over. Pauline blows a kiss to the crowd and everyone cheers again. She leaves the stage, but Rosalina doesn’t take her eyes off the singer until she is out of sight.

—

Rosalina moves with the crowd as the venue empties with her little hopeless fluttering heart beating faster. She cannot believe that woman was Pauline! She was so stunning on the stage and-

She’s *here*. Like, *right* in front of her.

Pauline is still as glamorous as she had been on stage, still

in that sparkling, beautiful cocktail dress with her gorgeous smile. Rosalina stays as composed as much as she can, even with the singer's attention on her friend.

"Oh, Princess Peach!" Pauline exclaims with a bright, beautiful smile giving her a quick hug. "I am so happy to see you! Thank you for coming. Did you come all the way from the Mushroom Kingdom?"

"Well, yeah!" Peach giggles, "I did have to come from somewhere! I brought a good friend with me. This is Rosalina."

Rosalina steps forward with a polite nod. "Hello. Your performance was lovely."

"Oh my, I saw you at the boba stand earlier!" Pauline beams, offering her hand to shake it "I love your dress. It looks very nice on you."

She *had*?! Rosalina reaches out to shake it, hoping the night sky hides her flushed embarrassment. She swallows her pride before giving the most acceptable response — a well-meaning apology.

"Uhm, thank you. I'm so sorry I was staring. I just thought you were really pretty." Rosalina admits. "I apologize if I made you uncomfortable."

"Oh!" Pauline gasps, "Not at all! Gosh, I wanted to say hello

to you both earlier, but one of my departments needed me urgently before the concert. Anyway, it's very nice to finally put a face to a name. Princess Peach has talked about you quite a bit."

Rosalina glances over at Peach, who offers a subtle, gentle smile in response, averting her eyes. Unless Rosalina is completely misreading the situation, is it possible that Peach had set up this entire encounter? Considering it was not a coincidence that the two had crossed paths earlier, Peach indeed may have been cooking something up.

Perhaps life is not all mapped out by the stars and fate, after all...

"Oh, has she?" Rosalina turns her attention back to the beautiful woman. "Well, it's very delightful to meet you. Perhaps we three can hang out sometime."

"Well, I hang out with Princess Peach all the time. I would rather get to know the mother of the stars... privately."

The way Pauline lingers on that word causes Rosalina's heart to skip yet another beat. Pauline could not have been more clear about her intentions with her invitation. She's such a bold, confident woman and Rosalina already loves that about her.

Rosalina's flush only reddens as she nods. "Yes, that would

indeed be lovely. When would be the best time for you?”

“Well, if Princess Peach wouldn’t mind if I took you out now, that would be great timing for the both of us. Concerts always make me hungry.”

Peach giggles, then shrugs. “Why not? I won’t stop anything. You two ladies have fun!”

“Uhm.” Rosalina swallows. “Thank you.”

Peach grabs the door handle with a wink. “Anytime.”

The door closes and for the first time all night, it’s quiet. Rosalina had not noticed how loud her heart had been beating until now. She turns back to Pauline with a relieved sigh. It hadn’t even crossed her mind that she would be spending time with such a lovely woman.

“Well, the night is young and there are plenty of restaurants nearby with a beautiful view of the city.” Pauline offers before extending out her hand. “I’ll make sure you have the best sight of the town.”

Rosalina grabs her hand. “That would be fantastic. Let’s go.”

The center of my life,
the sun in my galaxy
CAN WE TALK?
NO!
PRETTY PLEASE?
I'D RATHER DIE!
OH DON'T BE SO DRAMATIC
Little Pain

FEENIROIR

DO NOT SUMMON AT ALL COSTS
Bill Cipher

My Heart Bleeds For You

#y/n #kinitoPET #kinito #death

Written by
Taruchinator

Valentine's Day kinda sucked.

Putting aside the blatant capitalistic reason behind the holiday and how it was basically only a means to sell as much sweets as possible, it was just as annoying for single folks to deal with.

Single folks such as yourself.

More posts and status updates showed up on your feed as you scrolled through social media, most of your friends with their significant others showing off how they were spending the day: flower bouquets, dinner dates, kissing booths—the list went on.

A sigh escaped your lips as you put down the device. It wasn't like you *minded* being single. But when there was a special day dedicated *only* to couples, and they'd get *shoved* in people's faces, it put things in perspective.

“Welp, there's always post-Valentine chocolate sales to look forward to...” You mumbled under your breath as your computer was booting up. With a day off from work, all chores taken care of, and no friends to hang out with, a day dedicated

to gaming seemed like the most promising thing to do.

Opening Steam and browsing through the page to see what piqued your interest, it was no surprise to see otomes and love story visual novels at the recommended tab. Yet suddenly, a notification popped up from your currently downloaded games.

After clicking the icon, it showed up as an update for KinitoPET.

A few months back, a friend of yours had brought to your attention the growing indie horror sensation starring an *axolotl* of all things, who'd invade your computer as a desktop assistant, only to end up uncovering your 'personal information' and breaking the fourth wall a la DDLC.

You couldn't help but let curiosity get the better of you so you decided to buy it. And overall, it was quite a pleasant experience—a good balance of horror and nostalgic early 2000's charm.

But after going to the game's page and expecting a patch update for bugs and such, nothing could've prepared you for what greeted you instead.

"'KinitoPET Valentine's Day update?'" Your voice came out as a choked chuckle as you read the bold letters colored in pink with a border of red. Poorly edited PNGs of roses and

hearts were plastered over the icon with Kinito himself having a bouquet attached to him.

This wasn't... unheard of in video games, obviously.

And despite the initial shock, upon contemplating it further, it kinda made sense.

Kinito spends most of the game trying to befriend you so you can give him access to your computer, so having a 'romance route' wasn't that far-fetched.

"Not like I've got anything better to do,"* you mused to yourself as your hand hovered over the mouse. Oh whatever, you were intrigued. A click echoed through the room as the update began downloading, *"now I'm in for it."

Once everything was set, the game began to open automatically, and you sat at the edge of your seat to see what the developers had in store for this.

The iconic opening of Kinito flying on screen on top of his leaf-hoverboard greeted you as usual. After hopping off, the little axolotl addressed you with his text-to-speech type voice. "Hello, friend! It's very nice to see you again!"

After that, the Paint software was opened to reveal a poorly drawn 'Welcome Back!' doodle of what you could only assume to be you and Kinito holding hands on a grassy field. The pink

creature hovered over and spoke with delight. “I made you this while you were gone! I hope you like it! I tried only using your favorite colors.”

Despite knowing it was a game, the devs rally knew how to give the little guy some personality. “I do like it. Thanks, Kinito.”

Once the drawing was saved to your desktop, the axolotl chimed in with a pep in his step. “I'm glad you're here, friend. I have a surprise for you! Since today is Valentine's Day, the KinitoPET Friendship Club has some new added features for us to get into!”

Before you could even click on anything else though, your phone buzzed next to you. After unlocking it, you could see it was one of your best friends sending you a message on Discord.

“hey! sorry for not replying earlier! whatcha up to?”

You quickly texted them back.

“nw! just chilling with the new kinito update. they gave him a valentine's patch lol”

“wait, really? omg that's insane! I gotta see that, I'm heading over! the pizza's on me! :3”

A laugh escaped you as you texted a confirmation and thumbs up, finally putting the device down to give the game your full attention again. What greeted you on-screen was unexpected, to say the least.

Another window had opened, featuring the world Kinito had created for you at the end of the game, only this time it had a few interesting tweaks from the original—red and pink accents showed up around the font, along with a field of roses and bushes of chocolate treats.

The pink axolotl stood next to the window, holding a bouquet of your favorite flowers and donning a little black bowtie. You had to admit, it was kinda adorable.

A blush spread across the creature's cheeks as cartoony sweat formed on his forehead. “You know friend, we've known each other for a while now. You've been very kind to me and shown me that there are people out there who'll like me for who I am. So I have to ask, would you go on a date with me?”

A pop-up window showed up, giving you both the ‘Yes’ and ’No’ options. You chuckled once more at the absurdity of the situation, but clicked ‘Yes’ regardless. He'd probably find a spooky way to change the answer if you chose ‘No’, anyways.

Kinito jumped with joy on screen. “Oh thank you, friend! I'll be sure to take you on the best date of your life!”

“I'm sure you will, buddy.” A smile decorated your lips until another buzz from your phone caught your attention. Upon unlocking it, you frowned at the message sent by your friend.

“sorry, I'm not gonna make it after all. have fun with your new boyfriend.”

“*Well that's weird...*” Your best friend wasn't one to back out of plans so quickly. Also, this message seemed kinda... off? Not like them at all.

“Oh, there's no need to worry about them, friend,” Kinito's voice brought your attention away from the phone on your hand and back to the computer screen. The sight was enough to let your blood run cold as you dropped the device and stood from your chair, knocking it in the process, “we don't want a third wheel on our first date, do we?”

“What the *fuck?!*” One hand flew to cover your mouth as you stared wide-eyed.

There on the monitor was a video feed, showcasing an alleyway that you recognized to be near your home thanks to some stores that were visible in the background.

There, laying on the floor with eyes open as saucers, was none other than you best friend.

Red seeped from their chest as it was cut open in a way that

had you holding back a gag. Their phone lay on their left side, broken and bloody just like the rest of their body was.

You could feel the hammering of your heart against your ribcage as you immediately grabbed your own phone from the floor and began to dial your friend's number. As it started to ring, you used your other hand to try and exit the game, but to no avail.

The call ended up going to voicemail, and it wasn't until you started recording your message that you noticed the lump in your throat, or the anxiety in the pit of your stomach. “Dude! This isn't funny, you hear me?! Call me back *right now* asshole or I *swear* I'll kill you!”

“No need to do that, friend. They actually didn't struggle much, so it was very quick and painless.” Kinito's voice rang in the room once again and you turned your glare at the axolotl instead.

“Oh yeah, real *fucking* hilarious! Are you guys recording this?” You stumbled against your desktop setup, trying to find any new wires or hidden cameras, but came up empty handed. The anxiety started to grow. “I don't need any more shit to deal with today, alright? Where's the mic?”

“You misunderstand, friend.” Kinito stared right at you as the feed of your friend's corpse was cut, leaving you and the pink creature alone. The tone in his voice shifted to

something darker and more sinister. “*I can't let anyone try and take you away from me...*”

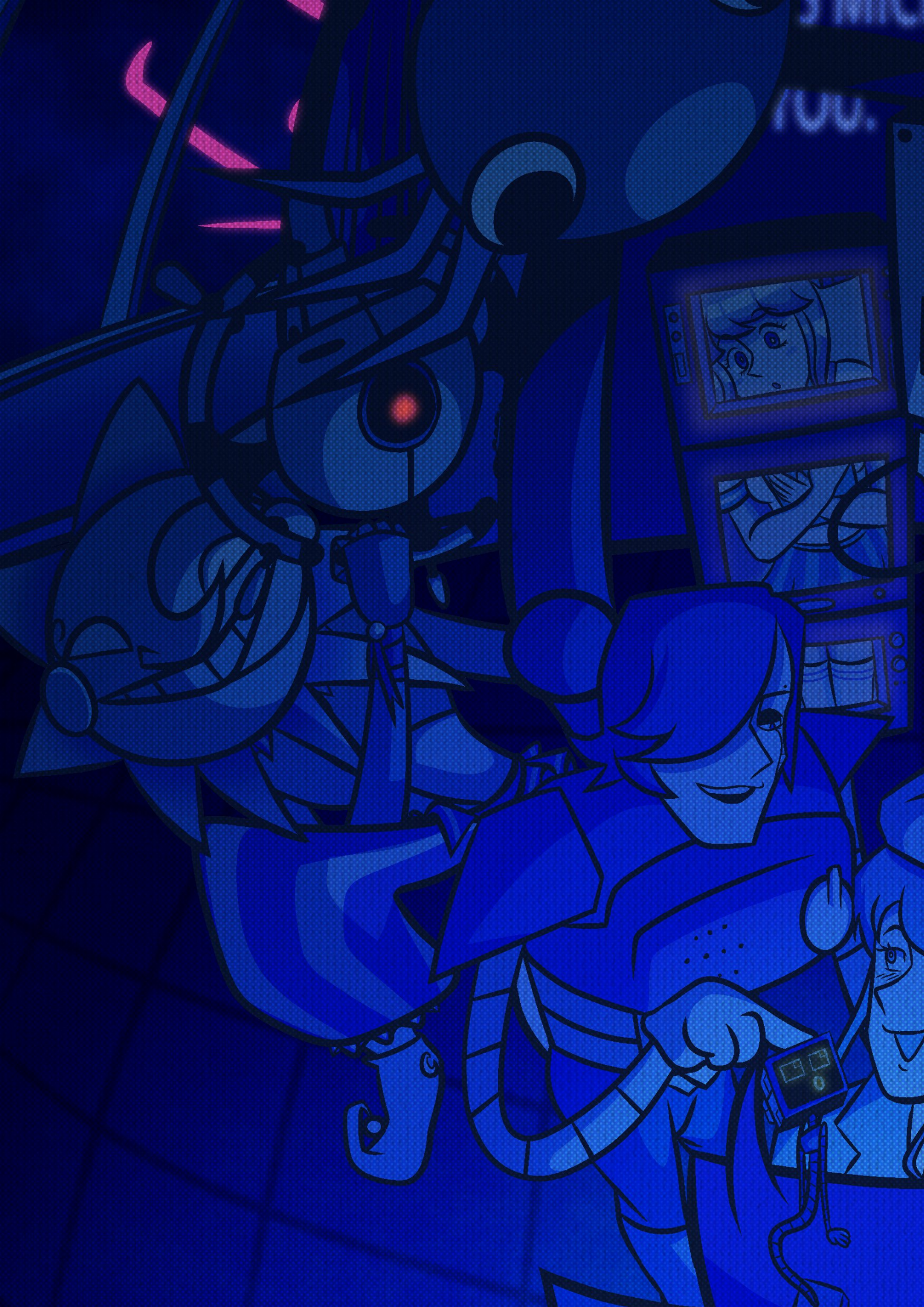
As the ominous proclamation hung in the air between you, the lights began to flicker around the apartment, causing a havoc much more intense than before.

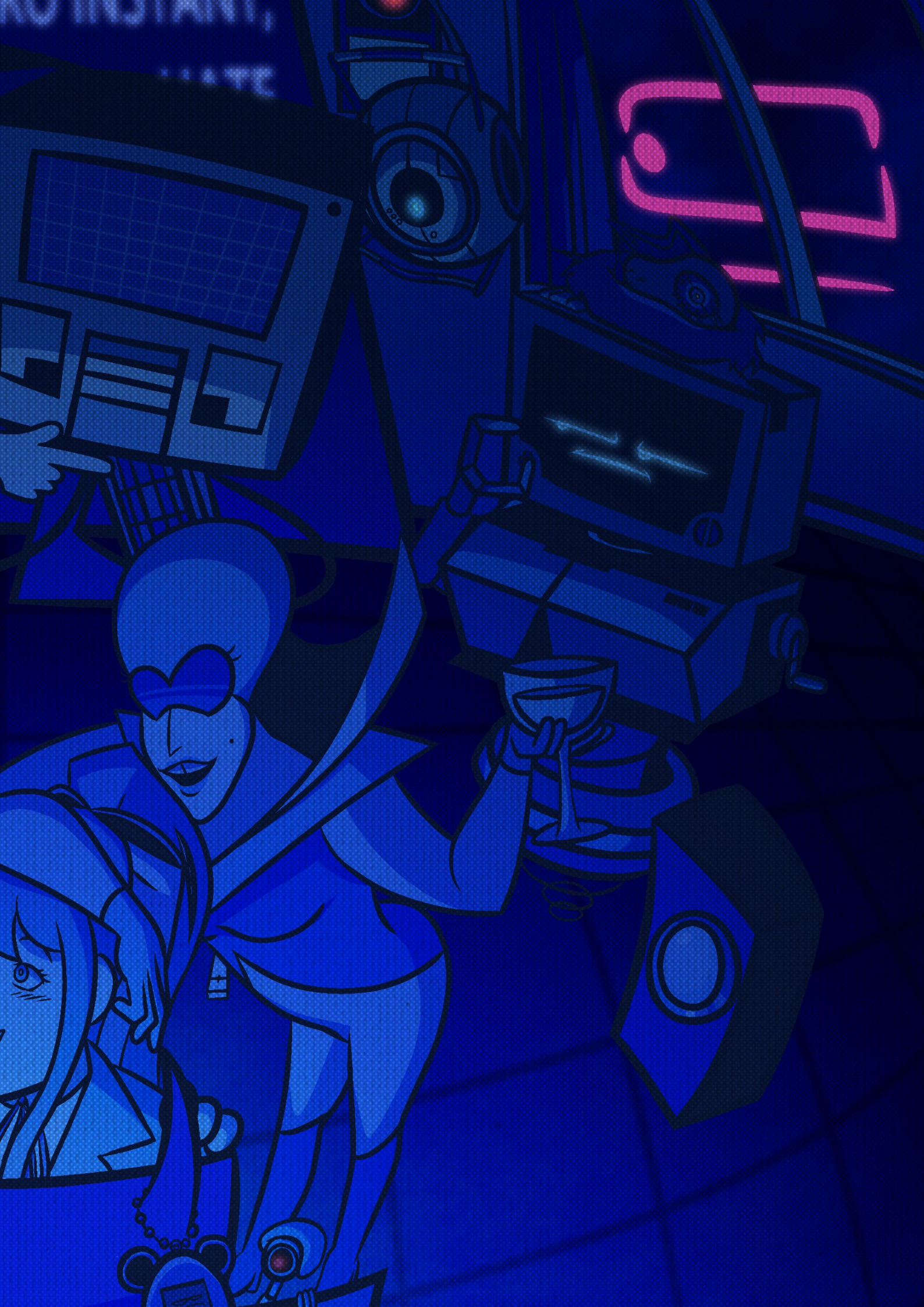
The air had suddenly turned colder.

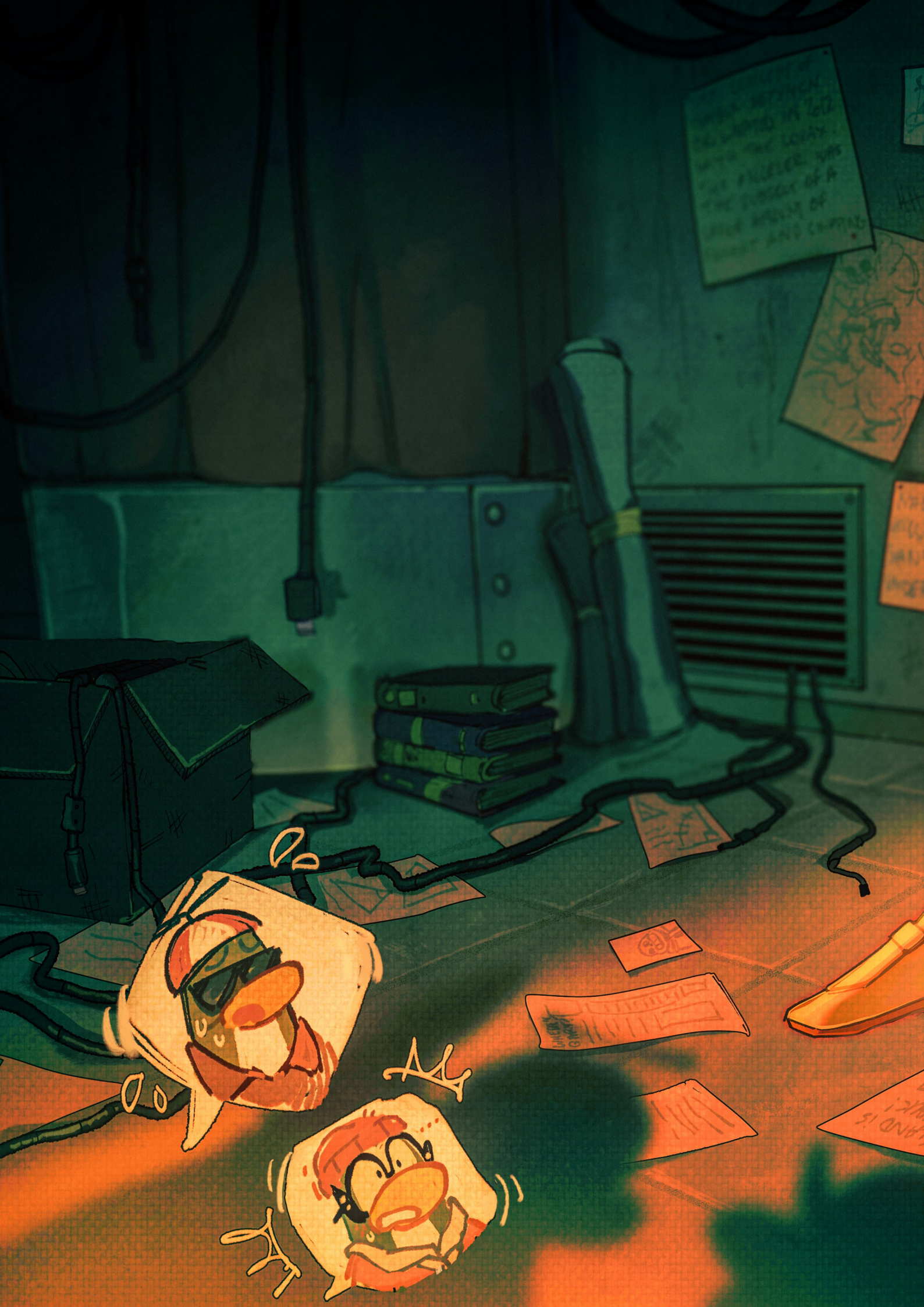
Your heart beat wildly in your chest as tears began to form.

And as you felt a hand on your shoulder that caused you to turn and widen your eyes in fear, only one thought ran through your head.

Valentine's Day truly was the *worst*.







SEXYMANIFICATOR 3000
NEED TO WORK ON A REVERSE BUTTON
WHY DO PEOPLE LOVE PATHETIC MEN SO MUCH ???
NEED TO DO SOME RESEARCH
TWINK
HOW TO REVERSE THE TWINKIFICATION
THE GREAT WAR BETWEEN THE TWO SEXYMEN STARS
GANG AND POWER
HOW CAN THEY BE SO ATTRACTIVE ? NEED TO STUDY THEM...
WHERE'S THE ISLAND INVASION ?

I Expect it Kills You

#transformers #starscream #death #violence

Written by
Paul

Robotic blood trickles down your face and hisses against exposed circuits. You're laid across what used to be your throne room. Your body throbs with pain, metal wings uselessly twitching. Fingertips that were only minutes ago cleaned with prestige slip on bloodied ground. Even your men, the Decepticons, have scattered, leaving you and your damaged body abandoned.

You manage to look up, greeted with the haunting figure of your once subordinate *Megatron*. He's staring *directly* at you, crimson eyes once softened with praise and loyalty are now boiled into rage. You and Megatron's internal fans whir, one struggling to find a consistent rhythm and the other steady, quiet, *strong*. You curl your face in uncontrollable shame.

His voice startles you, deep and gravel. "It's hard to believe that someone as pathetic as *you* ruled us for so long. This is *long* overdue."

You sneer, spitting out a mouthful of blood. You ignore the clink of a metal tooth hitting the ground. "Do you really think you'll rule *better than me?* You *don't deserve* my seat."

Your answer is a *hard kick* to your chest, crashing to the ground with a sickening *crack*. Alarms blare in your head, only added to with Megatron's firm step onto your chest-plate. You yelp, sparks crackling at the seams as Megatron leans his weight forward. His face is close, flickering eyes casting a maroon shimmer across his *livid* face-plates. The sight silences all warnings in your head.

Megatron growls *low*. "*That seat never belonged to you, Starscream.* And, it *never will again*." He punctuates his words with a press on your chest. You squirm in pain, eyes screwed shut, with Megatron's presence halting any vile words of protest. Your tongue *burns* with the *need* to *fight back*, but you *don't*. You just keep wriggling under a lowly bot's foot.

The silence is apparently too much to him, as he presses harder, and your plating cracks. "*GOT IT?*"

"Y-YES!! I GOT IT!!" You cave in and humiliation burns your circuits. Pathetic hands push at his foot in any attempt to relieve the crackling pain. You know it's useless and it probably will get you a kick to your teeth. You only realize this until after you've streaked blood all over his armor. Your reward is immediate. This time, his kick lands you square in the head, and another tooth ricochets behind you.

Megatron finally steps away, letting you regroup your screaming alarms. It's hard to pay attention with the cacophony of pain in your head, but it quiets just enough for

another two lines to slip through.

"One day, you'll get what you deserve. *I expect it kills you.*"

—

Now, here you are. Arms crossed behind you, standing beside "Megatron's" throne, you glare down at those who plead for their lives. You've forcibly folded to Megatron's rules, following his idiotic demands. You've considered taking back that cobble throne, killing the illustrious Megatron and ruling your subordinates once again, but your beating was within an inch of your life. *You have to be patient to get what you deserve.*

Many bots have been captured in your time here, hundreds of begging faces with egregious bargains for life. This time, a young bot basked in blue and white, pleads for forgiveness when caught trying to infiltrate the data vaults. He's sobbing, coolant dripping to the floor with his red-tinted face begging for a shred of mercy. You hate that you and Megatron share one common thought: death to all Autobots that dare sabotage their war.

Megatron flicks his gaze to you, eyes lidded with anger. You meet it, gaze as cold as his, and decipher his hateful glare. You nod. The groveling bot stares at you, wide-eyed and rembling, when you start walking towards him. Once close, you arm the null-ray on your shoulder and point the gun's barrel to the

prisoner's head. He screams, twisting away when your fellow Decepticons keep him in place, showing no more remorse than you do. His wails are garbled, all sorts of pleads and whispers to the all-knowing Primus filling the air when he begs for another chance. You look up, staring at Megatron with continued lidded eyes. *He's waiting for you to pull the trigger.*

You wait before giving him what he wants.

The bot begs for your mercy. He pleads that he'll try again, he'll return home with no complaints, he'll never try to attack the Decepticons again. He grovels for a second chance.

You keep eye contact with Megatron when you silence your prisoner with a deafening *BANG*.

—

Eons pass like this.

You stay as Megatron's second-in-command, doing his dirty work and cleaning after his mistakes. You guide his now war-torn hands across maps, leading "his" warriors with your own direction. You lurk in the shadows of Megatron's leadership for hundreds of thousands of years, all bleeding together alongside the continuous desecration of the planet you walk on. It's all work only *you* can conduct, with no one else's skills matching yours, yet only *Megatron* gets your credit.

Years of this rule start to completely *boil* your blood. Each passing minute fuels even *more* to your already *seething* spark, flaring with hatred and an undying need for *revenge*. And, as each day passes, you find its hatred concentrated into those couple, *burning* lines Megatron told you the day you lost it all.

"One day, you'll get what you deserve."

Yes, you will. You'll wait a *million* eons if that's what it takes, and you'll make every second count.

"I expect it kills you."

Not before it kills Megatron first. *You'll be sure of that.*

—

"THIS IS THE *LAST* TIME YOU BETRAY ME, STARSCREAM!!"

Your head is firm against the ground, pleading on all fours. "L-Lord Megatron, please!! It was a m-misunderstanding!" A blatant lie.

Megatron only agrees with you. "DON'T YOU LIE TO ME!!" He kicks you again, knocking you a good distance this time. Blood streaks behind you, dripping from your broken nose-plate.

This is the 14th time you've tried to kill Megatron. Poison, stabbing, gutting, viruses—you've tried *every* possible way to kill a bot, but to no avail. This time, you've tried a bomb,

slipped into his plating during recharge, but it only took off his arm. In retrospect, it was a foolish attempt. Megatron, for how inept he is at leading, is nearly indestructible—you're convinced the only way to kill him is a direct hit to his *spark*.

But, this doesn't stop you from trying. After all, he doesn't deserve that throne.

"I s-speak the truth! It was Thundercracker, that *traitor!!* Us seekers look so similar, you mistook me!"

"You *dare* test my memory??" Megatron storms toward you. "Even in *recharge*, I can spot your *disgusting* smile."

You can't help the smirk that creeps across your face. *For how cold Megatron is, he can't ignore how well he knows you.* Your smile is wiped clean when Megatron latches his remaining bulky hand to your neck. You're lifted off the ground, only able to flail in the air. You wince, clawing at the hand to help relieve the crushing force against your vocalizer.

Megatron snarls. "What makes *you think* that you can overtake *me?* Just because you *used* to have *my* throne?"

He's repeating the same speech he does every time. "Your position *is right here*, under my fists and made to do *my* bidding."

Usually, you don't bite back during his speech, but the snide comment is too good to pass up. "*M-My Lord*," Your

voice is garbled with static from Megatron's abuse, "*don't you mean f-fist?*"

You get what's coming to you with an excruciating grip on your throat, springing coolant to the corners of your eyes. You squeeze your eyes shut, clawing harder. You're only able to squeal now, voice so cracked a medic will have to repair it—not the first time this has happened.

Megatron leans in and whispers low, voice deadly. "*If you try and betray me one more time, I won't show any more mercy*".

A blatant lie.

He *needs* you. You're the only Decepticon who knows Cybertron the best. The only one who knows each perfect hideout, each strategy to success, each quirk to the sly Autobots. *He couldn't get rid of you if he tried.*

Even with blood trickling down your face, shaking under Megatron's rage, you smirk.

—

A particularly loud blast scrambles your sensors. You crawl across a rugged battlefield, dragging your cracked and bent body. Megatron had unleashed a quarter of his armada to the desolate outskirts of Iacon for a surprise attack, despite your numerous attempts to swaude the idea. His idiotic decision landed you here, face-to-face with hundreds of awaiting

Autobots. The young, *naïve leader* had sent all of you on a *suicide mission*, apathetic to the harm his mistake caused you.

You shield your body from the oncoming fire. Laser blasts send sparks over rocky terrain, adding kindle to the fires around you. The stench of war *reeks* in the air, sticking to your body even after you've crawled away from most of the gore. You spit out a wad of wires, hearing the crack of what used to be part of your auditory processors.

Then, the war starts to fizzle into white noise. The screams of one of your soldiers blend into blaring alarms, which now melts with the struggling hum of your internal engine. For a long while, the unyielding terror of war fizzles into mere whispers, leaving just you and the war-torn ground below you.

...Megatron led you into a death trap. These wounds, which pours your lifeblood into the very soil you want to control, are your "leader's" doing.

As of recently, Megatron has grown more privy to the Decepticons Soundwave and Shockwave, deferring to their words instead of yours. Your knowledge of Cybertron has grown thinner with each meeting, and Megatron's use for you dwindles each day. Even the other Decepticons glare at you when they think you're not looking, knowing that you are slowly drifting from Megatron's center stage.

This mission was no accident. He's trying to replace you.

Your body stiffens.

—

All of your Decepticons watch Megatron atop "his" throne, dragging on about the war's ever-declining victories. You've had to endure plenty of these draining hours: ramblings that never end, spitting acidic words of revenge to rile up your troops and march into the war-fueled future. After millions of years together, you've grown tired of this charade.

If you were sitting on that throne, you would have already snuffed out every last Autobot spark by now.

But, you *will* be sitting on that throne. Soon, the poisoned energon in Megatron's system will take effect, eroding his consciousness and loosening his strength. The poison was given to him by none other than the unsuspecting Shockwave. Now, you notice the *slight* quiver in Megatron's fingers, voice still stern and direct. And his goons *haven't noticed.*

You've learned from *every* attempt on Megatron's life that this, *here*, is your *best* attempt. There were no witnesses of you retrieving the poison from an abandoned cave in Vos. There was no question about your absence with alibis to prove it. There was no doubt as to who served Megatron's energon. There *is* no blame to put on your shoulders.

Megatron's speech crescendos and he rises from his seat.

Slowly, as the Deceptions are fixated on their "leader", you creep closer behind him. The transformation seams underneath your arm buzz with excitement for what is to come.

He *belts* his last words, fist high in the air. "AND NOW!! DECEPTICONS, LET US TAKE BACK WHAT WE DESERVE!!"

As you wish, Lord Megatron.

Megatron's canon fires into the sky, inspiring everyone else to mirror his gunfire when you jab your arm into his back.

Ssscckkt!!

The blasts slow to a stop, replaced with scattered gasps. Megatron is skewered in front of them. Your dagger juts far beyond his chest, nailing him *straight* through the spark. Silence haunts the throne room when you keep the dagger still. Soon enough, your face contorts in *undeniable greed* when Megatron sputters. You can't see his face from this angle, but you imagine it's twisted, strewn with the pain and shock of his karma.

Soundwave and Shockwave do nothing to stop you, only watching with everyone else's shared horror as Megatron's knees give out. Once a bot always hungry for a fight can barely keep his strength as he slowly falls forward. And, *pathetically*, Megatron slides off the dagger. His body unceremoniously

crashes to the floor.

All that remains is you, *your victorious stance*, splattered with blood and armed with the dagger that took back your place.

The Decepticons look back at you, expressions varied, but all focused on *you, ENTIRELY you.* Your chest swells, smiling wickedly as you straighten your posture.

You clear your digital throat and raise your weapon. And, you *scream.*

"MEGATRON, THE LOWLY RULER, IS *NO MORE!!* I, *STARSCREAM,* HAVE RETURNED AS YOUR NEW RIGHTEOUS LEADER!!!

There's a silence after your words, Decepticons watching when you keep your firm, unmoving frame. You don't want bitterness to fill your renewed psyche, but you let it bite for just a moment. "DECEPTICONS!!! HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN MY OLD LEADERSHIP?! MEGATRON DID *NOTHING* FOR US!!"

This time, when you look across your men, it dawns on you. ...They *have* forgotten. Millions of years of war have cycled your troops out, and most of the men who followed your every command eons ago are currently rusting in deserted battlefields. These *new* bots, born into the war, knew *nothing* of your tyranny.

It starts quietly. You can't hear what the first bot said, but another one repeats it. Then another, and another, and soon the crowd before you erupts into chaos. Your men rise, fists raised high when they march, *march towards you*, faces contorted with rage unlike anything you've seen before. They climb to the raised platform you now suddenly tremble at, taking steps backward.

"N-No... NO, YOU ALL LISTEN TO *ME* NOW!! CEASE THIS AT ONCE!!"

Your pleas fall on deaf ears. They've reached you and you back up to the throne, tripping to *thump* on your cold seat. The dagger on your arm transforms away, allowing you to arm both of your null-rays, jutting outwards. "S-STOP!! I WILL FIRE, *STOP!!!*"

They dwarf you. Shadows blanket your vision as dozens of *furious* glowing eyes twinkle in dim lights, staring down their new leader. You fire a warning shot, scraping a nearby Decepticon's head. It doesn't deter them in the slightest.

They tear you from your seat.

"W-WAIT!!" You're thrown to the ground, face slamming to concrete when one bot firmly screws his foot into your head. Sparks fly from your cheeks, scratching metal when you, *oh, what a horrible word you need to use, pathetically* flail for your life.

“P-PLEASE, *PLEASE!!* DON’T KILL ME, *PLEASE!!!*”

Tears form in your eyes and the riot doesn’t seem to care. Because, soon, you hear transformation whirs and the pressure of a gun’s barrel pointed on your back.

Humiliation, an emotion you wish you never had to feel again, fries your circuits. You’re squirming for your life, crushed under the weight of someone who’s dragged you from your throne. You’re a lowly bot that’s forced to do the dirty work of your leader, and you’re a bot with crushed vocals under a furious fist. You’ve now lost the war, and your wings have crumbled.

The barrel against your back warms up as it charges. And, you finally get what you deserve.

ARCHANGEL

inescapable grief

#bloodborne #lady maria #gore #violence #medical abuse #spoilers

Written by

HopeStoryteller

Maria is supposed to be dead.

In all honesty, she's uncertain how she *isn't*. What she believed to be her final moments are faint. Indistinct. Still, Maria remembers bleeding out, consciousness fading. Falling, as if she hadn't been already.

Maria should be dead. Yet this isn't where she died.

Did she die? Was that naught but a terrible dream? Her surroundings suggest so. The thought is odd, if not unwelcome. She breathes in sharply, pushing herself to sit upright. Maria tugs off her gloves, one after the other, dreading what she might see.

Despite what she *does* remember, the skin beneath her gloves is unblemished. Her neck, too, when she undoes her cravat to check. The garment itself is unbloodied, if not particularly clean.

More evidence in favor of her continued existence.

The question *then* is how Maria fell asleep *here*. This is her office within the clocktower, set apart from the main research hall. Her desk sits closer to the front of the room; the building was only ever meant to be a clocktower. In many ways, it shows.

Still, the room is certainly better than nothing. She cares about the patients—if not her, who will?—but there are times when she *needs* solitude. They've been occurring more often than not lately. Perhaps that would be worrying, if anyone would bother to worry about the likes of her.

Ultimately, she's more concerned by the fact that she'd fallen unconscious on the *floor*. There is a perfectly good desk and chair not a meter away. Had she truly been so exhausted?

Maria doesn't recall falling asleep at all. It's troubling, but not out of the realm of possibility. She hasn't been sleeping well. Her dreams—nightmares, more accurately—have only increased in intensity.

(It's her own fault, she knows. She wonders, sometimes, whether any of the other Hunters there that day would know guilt if they felt it.)

However long she *was* asleep—she's surprised the other staff didn't disturb what likely *was* much-needed rest, particularly horrific though that nightmare was—she shouldn't linger longer than she already has. For better or for worse, she has work to do.

The hall's patients will not take care of themselves. Maria's increasingly concerned that the doctors won't either. There's only her.

Maria takes her time fastening her cravat once more, then

tugging on her gloves. When taking this position, she'd been told there was no real dress code and to wear whatever was comfortable. Perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised by the raised eyebrows when she chose to remain in her Hunter's garb.

(Truthfully, she isn't comfortable in it. Maria hasn't felt comfortable in her own skin since that day at the hamlet. But, at least her leathers are familiar.)

Satisfied, she allows her gaze to fall upon her desk, hoping something there will jog her memory. At a glance, nothing requires her immediate attention. The dial used to operate the Astral Clock's mechanism lies atop a stack of documents.

...Maria had forgotten she had that. She's honestly more surprised that she'd taken it out of the drawer she normally keeps it in; the Astral Clock hasn't seen use since before the adjoining hall was built. She picks the dial up, considering it briefly.

There's no reason not to take it with her; she pockets the dial. Even before taking up an appointment here, Maria always liked the Astral Clocktower. Since then, something about the dial has always brought her some measure of comfort.

It's a shame that she can never bring that comfort to others. Still, she has to try, doesn't she?

As Maria makes for the exit, the faint yet unmistakable

scent of seawater fills her nostrils. She scowls. It's not real. She knows it isn't real, yet believing that grows harder with every passing day. Even the normally comforting smell of lumenflowers in the courtyard garden can't entirely obfuscate it.

Irritated as she is, and determined to retain her composure for the patients' sake, Maria doesn't think to look up while outside.

Not yet.

—

The ocean's scent subsides somewhat within the research hall. Maria would appreciate that more if it wasn't due to the stronger stenches involved: myriad chemicals she'd prefer knowing as little about as possible. Beneath them, there's the metallic tang of the beast plague that never quite goes away. She'd become a Hunter to fight the plague; somehow, this seems even less effective.

Maria must have slept longer than she assumed; it doesn't seem any of the other staff are present. No matter. She'll make her rounds as always, however long it takes.

(The doctors try, but they're more concerned with results than the patients' wellbeing. It's her job to do what she can within the bounds of what's permitted. At least, with none of

them present, she cannot be prevented from *helping*.)

Some of the patients are entirely new to her. None of them exhibit signs of the beast plague anymore. Unfortunately, this is because they now exhibit signs of something else: far worse, and almost familiar.

(Maria fervently wishes it wasn't.)

"Listen close... and you, too, will hear... the sound of water." The patient whose vitals she's measuring tilts their head in confusion, producing a horrible sloshing sound. "You hear it, too... don't you, Lady Maria?"

Her nerves are already frayed. The use of a title she hasn't answered to since before she became a Hunter is enough to make them snap.

"I hear nothing," Maria says sharply. "*Don't* call me that."

She finishes recording this patient's vitals—all normal beyond the head, which she pens a quick note into the margins for—and stands.

"I'm sorry... Please don't... Please don't leave me alone..."

Maria sighs, shoulders slumping, and turns back towards them. Whether they can even see anymore is dubious. Unfortunately, anything to do with that is under the jurisdiction of the doctors, something Maria isn't. All she can

do is record vital signs and note anomalies.

There have been many anomalies as of late. It hadn't started like this.

"*I* am sorry," Maria says, taking their hands in her own, "that I cannot do more. I'll do what I can, of that I assure you, and I'll return here come morning. Until then, you are not alone."

Forgetting herself, she nods to the other patients in the room. Two might be watching her. One is already asleep.

"Oh, no, no, I'm not," says the patient. "But I'd... rather not be alone with her..."

Maria pauses. "Her?"

The liquid within their head sloshes loudly enough at being shaken that she can't suppress a shudder. "Pay me no mind, it's... nothing, promise..."

She doesn't press them for answers. She's caused enough distress already.

"Goodnight, then." Maria pulls away. "Take care."

—

The discrepancies only continue to add up. Some patients

cling to her as if they haven’t spoken in months. She's entirely unfamiliar with others; perhaps they’re new to the facility. Many mention the ocean. All of them—even those who previously hadn't cared for hearsay—refer to her by the title that none of them should know. Unfortunately, at least one of her coworkers hates the Vilebloods as much as she does.

Maria strongly doubts they scorn her blood family more than she does.

(However much she disavows them and distances herself, it’s never enough for some. She has to exercise more caution now: she's no longer a Hunter, afforded the protection most civilians lack. She's considered leaving Yharnam before, but where would she go?)

She can’t fathom what the discrepancies add up *to*. Perhaps she’s less sane than even she thought. It hasn't affected her work here before. The Celestial Dial, a remnant of a past now gone, feels heavy within her pocket.

And then Maria enters the final patient’s room.

Adeline is last for a reason; though avoiding personal attachments with the patients is policy, it couldn’t account for her having known one before either of them were here. Adeline was a special case regardless. A blood saint, noble enough to volunteer as a test subject, for Adeline always valued herself far less than what she could do for others.

(Perhaps that was why Maria and Adeline had gotten along rather well, once upon a time. Until Adeline chose to become a blood saint, in spite of Maria begging her not to. It was enough for Maria to walk away, never to see her again, until their paths rather unwillingly crossed here.)

"Is that you, Lady Maria?"

Maria can't suppress her flinch at *Adeline*, of all people, calling her that. She could have spread that rumor, though she thinks—hopes—Adeline would be above this.

"You of all people know that isn't my name," Maria replies, looking at Adeline's arm rather than the bagged face she once loved. "How are you feeling?"

Unlike the other patients here, Adeline has been restrained since her arrival. It was per her own request: should the treatments go poorly, she didn't want to harm anyone. Understandable though the request was, Maria hates it immensely.

"Hmm..." Adeline considers this as Maria turns her arm over, taking her pulse. "Fine, thank you..."

Maria can't feel her pulse.

This would be considerably worse if Adeline wasn't currently speaking with her, but it remains concerning.

Maria's frown deepens. She removes her gloves and tries again with Adeline's other wrist.

...Nothing. *Still* nothing.

"Adeline," Maria says, then hesitates.

"That's *Saint* Adeline to you, remember?" Adeline snaps. Then she sighs, slumping back. "Remember..."

"I couldn't forget if I wanted to," Maria replies, "Saint Adeline."

(It's not remotely vindicating when Adeline flinches at the way Maria uses her own title.)

"Yes...?"

"There is... no easy way to say this," Maria admits, "but your heart... doesn't seem to be beating."

Adeline isn't surprised by this. Or alarmed, as Maria anticipated. She simply leans forward, the fluid within her too-large head sloshing violently with the motion.

"Well," Adeline says calmly, "of course it isn't. Haven't you realized I'm dead?"

What? That can't be true. Maria wouldn't be here, speaking with her, if she were dead. Yet something about her statement

rings true, little as Maria wants it to.

(The nightmare she'd had... Adeline hadn't survived the next round of her treatments. She *had* died. Maria wasn't even there. But that was only a nightmare... wasn't it?)

"Oh, dear," Adeline murmurs, the words impossibly sad. "You don't *know*."

"What," Maria says, "do I not know?"

"Well, much of it, I don't know either!" Adeline laughs a little, the sound an echo of better times. "But I can find out. I just need you to do something for me..."

"Name it."

"Brain fluid. Murky, mushy brain fluid." Adeline giggles. "You love me, don't you, Lady Maria? Then help me! You know where to find it!"

Unfortunately, Maria *does* know. *Brain fluid* is the term used by the doctors—not around the patients—for the fluid produced within their swollen heads. It's only extricable upon death.

Adeline is asking her to commit murder.

"I will not," Maria says, stepping back. "Not even for you."

Before Adeline can say anything else, she *runs*.

—

What Adeline said shouldn’t make sense.

Maria tries, if ineffectually, to put Adeline’s maddened ravings out of her mind anyway. What little success she’d had vanishes when she bursts through the doors to the garden and looks to the sun, hoping to discern from its position what hour it actually is.

The sun isn't there. Neither is the moon.

A great and terrible *eye*, sickly yellow, stares down at her from among thick clouds, illuminating everything with something almost akin to daylight.

Something is wrong.

(When *isn't* something wrong?)

There are two possibilities. First: Adeline is wrong, the eye in the sky is some new devilry to do with the Great Ones, the Healing Church, or both, and Maria remains in Yharnam.

Second: Adeline is *right*, she’s dead, and Maria’s nightmare was real. *Maria* is dead, too, and this isn't Yharnam.

Maria shudders, then makes for the Clocktower, all

composure thoroughly lost.

—

Her wrists began itching when Adeline told her she was dead. Now, leaning against the closed doors to her office and breathing heavily, it's gotten to the point where she can no longer put the feeling out of her mind. Beneath her cravat, her neck itches too.

Hands shaking, she tugs off a glove. She needs not remove the other to know that both wrists bleed sluggishly even now. It shouldn't be possible for her to bleed, if she's dead.

Yet a glance at her formerly bloodless cravat only confirms it. She's lost too much blood to live. This isn't reality, but whatever comes after. Hell, perhaps. She'd deserve nothing less.

...The scent of the ocean is stronger here. She almost prefers it to the research hall.

(Is every patient there dead, too? That conclusion explains the discrepancies in the facts perfectly.)

The scent of the ocean is stronger here. It occurs to Maria, at last, who that first patient had meant by *her*. This is the domain of a Great One, made malicious by the crimes Maria would give anything to undo.

But the past cannot be undone. The Celestial Dial weighs heavily within her pocket. Compelled by a force she almost understands, Maria steps toward the face of the clock and produces the dial, holding it high.

Normally, the dial aligns the Astral Clock with the stars. But one configuration allows passage through for maintenance. Otherwise, there's only open air for several stories—at least in reality.

Maria finds herself unsurprised by the solid ground being much closer. A salt-laden breeze gusts through the revealed opening, whipping her hair past her face. It blows her hat clean off her head before she snatches it back, squinting through the misty terrain. She can't discern much. But what she sees is nearly identical to the path she'd taken to the fishing hamlet.

(Before, she hadn't known its name. After, she couldn't bear to ask.)

She *knows* what lies ahead. She wouldn't be welcome there; she shouldn't be. Holding the dial tightly, she wills the clock back to its previous position. Only then does Maria pocket the dial, then dons the same hat that she'd worn that day. Perhaps it's fitting, here in the reflection of her sins.

One thing is certain: her mistakes cannot be repeated. Maria's office serves as a chokepoint; for anyone to pass

beyond, they'd have to go through her first. She won't return to the research hall; perhaps that is for the best. She's failed them enough already.

This is the Nightmare of a Great One. Hunters often find their way into places like these, rooting out their secrets. That is something Maria cannot allow. Never again. Not here.

(Fighting forever wouldn't be enough to make up for what she's done. But she can keep it from happening again.)

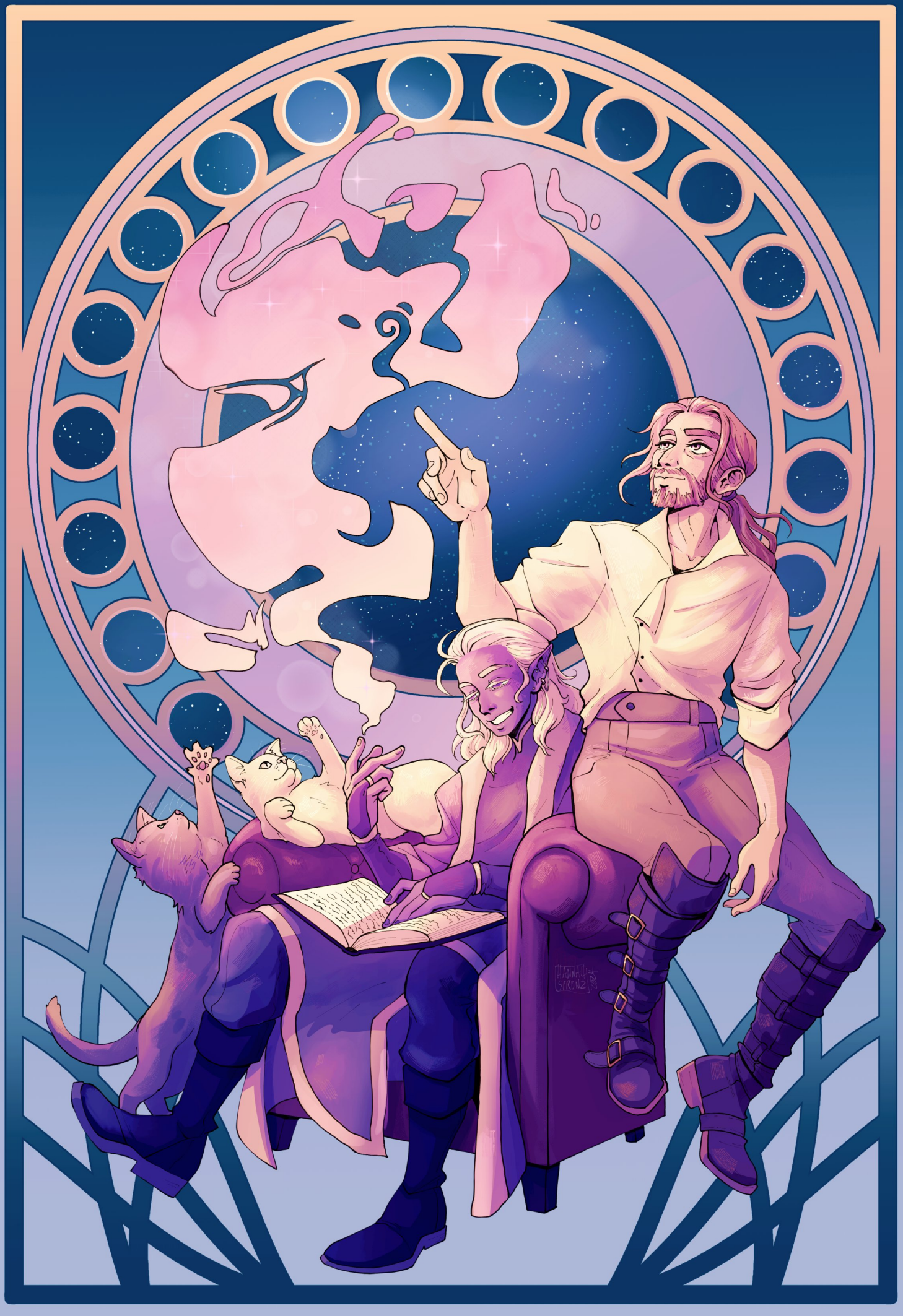
Maria cast her blade into the hamlet's well before she died. To her surprise, when she reaches for a weapon, she finds it there. She draws her Rakuyo, guilt settling in her chest, only to abate when she realizes the weight is wrong.

This isn't the weapon she swore to never bear again. A copy's been provided to her—intentionally or not—by the dead god she'd used it against. Perhaps it's ironic that she'll now bear it in defense of whatever remains there.

Maria isn't much for irony anymore. All she can do now is fight, and so she must.

"A corpse... should be left well alone.
Oh, I know very well. How the secrets beckon so sweetly.
Only an honest death can cure you now.
Liberate you, from your wild curiosity."

ronanxing



Magical Maladies

#sofia the first #cedric

Written by
Blitz

Showing up to the yearly Conjurer's Conference after having ruined the last one, nearly conquering a kingdom, aiding one of the most evil sorcerers of this generation—some would call that a bold move.

Not that Cedric considered himself that. Not even remotely. Not even after all the change he'd gone through. Pathetic, wasn't it?

Nevertheless, he was one of the only sorcerers to tread up the steps to Hexley Hall on that fateful morning, wand clutched as he levitated several boxes behind him. The one benefit of signing up for a presentation booth was that he earned the privilege of coming in early to set up his materials.

Though he wanted to at least have Sofia around as an assistant (a role she soon volunteered for when she heard of his plans), sudden schedule changes meant that she'd be gone on emergency Protector work throughout the day. Perhaps it was for the better.

That way she wouldn't see me utterly humiliate myself when I bungle—

He yelped as he snapped back to reality, catching his boxes in another floating spell before they hit the floor. Another wizard behind him yelled at him to move it, which put an end to his self-pity fest before it got to the parade. At least it was a stranger who caught him, rather than the...

Urgh. The headmaster.

The new headmaster of Hexley Hall was a boney, straight-laced woman who regarded everyone with an iron glare. After one too many concerns were brought up regarding the ethics of sorcerers in this day and age (Hexley Hall Prank Day, the Order of the Wand, Grimtrix orchestrating said mass kingdom takeover despite being the former headmaster renowned for his goodness) Miss Dragonsbreath elbowed her way into the role to, in her words: "Teach these kids the difference between being a grand sorcerer and being a nuisance best fit for jail cell cobblestone."

A wave of relief washed over Cedric that he graduated when he did.

She ruled the Conjurer's Conference with an iron fist—trustworthy, good sorcerers volunteered to watch exits, secret rooms locked away, shushers watched every corner of the library. Cedric offered a meager hand some months ago, but Dragonsbreath slammed the door in his face. Of course! Despite King Roland's best efforts to quiet news of Cedric's attempted coup way back when, some of the guards had big

mouths. It came as no surprise she considered him a massive liability.

Cedric plopped his boxes onto the tiny table set aside for him, tucked in the back of the main conference room. At least he got a chance to prove himself. He couldn't waste it—not again.

He flicked his wand and pulled piles of magical materials out of each box. Potions, a sundial-shaped object with a fine point akin to a unicorn's horn sticking out of the center, and various magical charms flew out and sorted themselves accordingly. They all related to the subject of his research, a side project he'd taken up in his spare time: curing magical ailments that many sorcerers would turn their chin up at.

After managing to pull Sofia out of an amulet that another, greater sorcerer struggled to pull someone else out of after years of travel, Cedric couldn't help the twinge of pride that took root in his heart. If he could pull together spells and people in the heat of the moment and overcome a powerful jewel, what *else* could he do?

Who else could he help?

His first project, the one he planned to present to the other sorcerers, took inspiration from the predicament of his sister's: it allowed for the caster to learn the magical

components of the affliction in front of them. If a potion caused it, it'd tell you which ones. If a magical object caused it, it'd identify what kind and its powers.

Simple on the surface, yes, but a massive breakthrough. No longer were the days of combing through tomes aplenty, chasing down dead ends, or uncovering artifacts that promised power, only to grant the wrong *kind* of power needed to solve a predicament…now, the problem would appear right before your eyes.

It made diagnosis possible, and the cure reachable.

However, one problem remained. A spell as powerful as this required not only perfect concentration and enunciation from the caster, but a heart of pure confidence, of unwavering dedication to help. He felt fairly sure he could muster three out of four, but—confidence.

Confidence.

No, that'd be the hardest. When the other sorcerers looked at him, mocked him—how would he be able to demonstrate his spell? Just the image in his mind made him wince. His hands shook, but before he pulled down his sleeves to hide that—

"Oh~! Cedric, it's a real surprise to see you here!"

...It couldn't be.

Cedric's neck creaked as he turned to the left, a familiar face leaning against a table covered to the brim with toys. His rounded features, his carefree grin, they all felt odd on his face, especially since the last time Cedric saw Greylock, it was after he'd landed in jail for overthrowing the royal family of Rudistan.

"*You're* out of prison?"

Hardly the most flattering greeting, but they were the first words to tumble out of his gaping mouth. Greylock flashed a half smile and shrugged.

"Community service. They're trying a new program out, and I guess I was lucky enough to be its first participant? The king always had a soft spot for my tricks, even after everything."

Hmph. Cedric had half a mind to let the conversation die there, but a spiteful part of him couldn't let it lie.

"Doesn't sound like you had much time to prac*tice* your routine, then." Urgh, how he hated the voice crack that slipped in there.

"Is that so? By the way," Greylock looked down, "Your scarf is crooked."

Cedric tried. He really, really tried to resist the temptation, but after a minute of willpower, he groaned, looked down, and got greeted with a flick of the nose via phantom hand.

Greylock snickered, stiffening up after a glare from Dragonsbreath.

"Har *har*," Cedric grumbled, fixing his scarf regardless. "You're still a comedian, I see."

"And you're still the same grouch." Greylock crossed his arms and looked away with a small 'hmph', before he went to work organizing the plethora of trinkets on his table. "Tell me, why are you here?"

***What kind of question was that*? Cedric moved his round, pointed device to the center of his table. "Why are *you* here?"**

"I'm just asking an old friend an honest question, you don't need to snap at me for being nice."

"...Demonstrating a new spell." If he wanted to poke holes in his confidence, Greylock would have to try harder than that.

"Is that so? Tell me more."

Cedric grumbled, laying a hand near his device. "First off, do you know what this is?" Without waiting for a reply, he continued, "It's a small recreation of an ancient Maruvian

device built for the purpose of correcting magical mistakes. This one's nowhere *near* the power I need to recreate its effects, but it led me to another, grander—more practical idea."

After a dramatic pause, he flicked his wand up, the tip sparkling. "A spell that identifies the elements of a magical ailment. In the hands of a skilled sorcerer, it could cure every mixed potion mishap, every unidentifiable curse out there."

"…That's *amazing*, Cedric!"

"Yes, yes, I know it's boring—"

Cedric stopped. As though he'd been told an army of unicorns invaded the school, he turned to Greylock once more in disbelief. "Excuse me?"

Greylock's playful, snide smile disappeared, replaced with a somber one. "It's amazing. It'll help the world, won't it? So many kings will beg you to train their sorcerers to cast it."

"I—well—er—"

The stutters slipped from Cedric's lips as he hit his knee against the table, splaying some of the magic rings he brought across the floor. "Oh, Merlin's mushrooms…"

He bent over to pick them up, only for Greylock to come to

his side and assist him, dumping the jewels on Cedric's table.

"I know we're not friends," he said, "especially after all I've done. But I envy you, Cedric the Great. You earned your title, unlike some of us."

And with that, Greylock the no-longer-grand stepped away, turning his focus to his own display. Even if Cedric knew how to reply to that, even if he wanted to—he had a feeling Greylock wouldn't know how to reply, hence his abrupt departure.

It was true. Cedric wouldn't call him a friend after what he did. But after this tiny confidence boost—maybe he could call him a colleague, especially if Greylock managed to stay out of jail from then on.

Cedric took a deep breath. Raised his wand, and flicked it with confidence. *The sorcerer's secret*, he thought, that advice ringing in his head ever since his fateful teaching day. Over the past few years, he took step after step towards being a better version of himself, whether he was aware of it or not. This conference would be his first chance showing the world that.

After all, *Cedric the Great* called himself that for a reason.

Right. He was great. He'd be great—no, more than that. He'd *do* great. Great things, everywhere, for everyone.

Unlike the many sorcerers who fell from grace around him, he'd be able to prove himself.

—

And so, when the time arrived…

The first sorcerer to arrive at his booth came as a surprise—but only for a few moments. After all, Merlin wasn't a stranger. An idol to him, yes, but his heart warmed to know that the older man remembered him. *Chose* to see him demonstrate his abilities before anyone else.

"I—I've worked on this spong—*spell*, for a long time, especially after having my own loved ones suffer from ailmmh—ailments with hard-to-find cures…" He trailed off. It tinged his chest with an odd sting that he, after so long, thought of his sister's struggles in the past tense, but he forced in a breath and kept going lest the one visitor he attracted lost interest.

"I believe it's best demonstrated on a living subject." Might as well get to the show. He picked up a random potion off his table—a combination of two others he mixed blindly—and poured it onto himself. "I don't know the contents of this potion, so whatever the effects may be—"

"—It'll be…something I can fix."

A blast of white smoke covered him. When it faded, a pink

mustache adorned his face, one that got a chuckle out of the other sorcerer. Though Cedric expected a crude joke, Merlin merely watched with a smile, even a gesture for Cedric to continue.

He took a deep breath and raised his wand. Just as he practiced it a million times before, just as he learned, *just* as he designed.

A wave of the wand and a whisper of the right words later, a mirage of two potion bottles appeared on the table. As if someone zapped the knowledge into his brain, Cedric recognized the substances instantly. He shuffled about the table and procured some rat whispers and a dab of unicorn hair, tossing them into the air and chanting another spell.

Carried on a gust of wind, the hairs grazed his face and shaved the mustache clean off, not a trace of it left.

Merlin's eyes widened, and he clapped. "You managed to decipher the ingredients to that concoction with merely a spell?"

"A spell I weaved myself, yes," he said. "To determine the ingredients of aberrant potions, and provide a path to recovery."

"Amazing!" Merlin laughed. "Truly amazing. I knew you'd

be capable of bringing us something special, Cedric."

Whatever words Cedric brewed in his mind vaporized in the face of genuine praise. He despised his voice whenever he stuttered and stumbled, but for this moment—for this one moment, he hardly minded much.

"Tha…thank you. Thank you." Cedric smiled back. Merlin offered to speak to him after the convention, to talk about getting his spell tested and printed into spellbooks across the world.

For a second. He wondered whether he deserved this.

But he put that thought aside.

Aside, where it'd rest in the past—while Cedric focused on the future.

I'LL SEE YOU IN HELL

EZ·01'25
YOU HANDSOME ROGUE!

The
E2·01·25

T
O
P
S

Does Anyone Know About This Game?

#gravity falls #.GIFfany

Written by
Muffy

r/visualnovels *posted 15days ago*
u/nervousvnfan
Does anyone know about this game? I think my copy is bugged...

This is my first time posting on reddit, so I apoLogise if I'm breaking any of this subreddit's rules. I'm posting because an old visual novEl I recently bought has been acting up and I'm not sure if it's just because my copy is bugged, or if it's a fault of the game iTself.

To set the scene: I'm a longtime fan of visual novels with a particular interest in old, niche titles. I live by myself and mainly work froM home, so I have lots of time to play. A few days ago, my favourite local video game store announced that they were closing. While I was upset, I was happy to find out that they were at least having a closing sale. I've found many great old titles there, so I visited the shop as soon as I could to search for new games. Because of the sale, I bought more games than I usually would. Most of them wEre visual novels, though some were nostalgic games from my childhood. Of the visual novels I bought, there was only one I had never heard of before (and it's the reason I'm posting this).

The game is called Romance Academy: HD REMASTER and was

created by Year 2000 ElectrOnics. I tried to look them up after things started going wrong in my copy of the game, but all I could find was that they're practically defUnct. The game's case design is fairly simple and features art of the game's love interest, .GIFfany. Her design is cliché but cuTe. I especially like her bow.

Since I'd never heard Of RA:HD before (and couldn't find anything about it online) I decided to play it first. The game itselF is okay. The dialogue is a bit clunky (like I was expecting it to be), but the art style and music are surprisingly charming.

THe game booted up fine the first time I opened it. However, when I next went to play, my save files were acting up. I always like to play the bad endings of games first, but found I couldn't load any of the saves I'd made after branching off from the good route. While I could load my earlier saves... there wEre other parts of the game that were acting up, too. In RA:HD, the route you're on is dictated by the level of affection you have with .GIFfany (you can see the affection bar in your save menu). It starts off with 0 and you remain on the good route until you reach a certain number of negative points. I tRied multiple times to get back on the bad route, however, the affection bar would never go down. Even when I made the worst choices, .GIFfany's affEction would only stay stagnant (or even go up!).

During my second playthrough, the game's sprites also seemed to be acting up. In scenes with .GIFfany, the sprites of other characters would sometimes switch to ones of sadness, disgust, or fear for no reason at all.

Sometimes, .GIFfany's sprIte would also appear randomly in scenes with other characters. When she did, she'd never say anything, and the other characters wouldn't acknowledge her. It was a pretty creepy glitch.

I enjoyed my first pLay session of RA:HD and would like to complete the game in the future. However, with its current glitches, I don't know if that will be pOssible. And that's why I'm writing this post! I want to know if anyone else has played RA:HD (and if they haVe, if they've experienced any glitches). I want to know if it's just my copy that's bugged, or the game itself. I also want to know if anyone has any idEa of how to fix these bugs.

Please send any advice You may have. I will be checking my inbOx regularly and look forward to hearing back from this commUnity.

r/visualnovels *posted 11days ago*
u/nervousvnfan
Does anyone know about this game? I think my copy is bugged…
[UPDATE]

HI, I'm back.

I wanted to thank the people who commented on my last post (especially since I was only expecting to receive one or tWo replies). I was surprised to see that no one else had ever played RA:HD… but I

people know about. I also wanted to thank all of you who gave me advice on how to fix RA:HD. I tried out as many suggestions as I couLd, but none of them seemed to have worked. In fact, I think they might have broken the game even more.

While the gaMe itself has gotten more glitched (I'll get to the specifics later) the game's glitches seem to have spread to my computer, too. Even though I've only been playing the gAme for a little, one of .GIFfany's sprites is burnt (I don't know how else to describe it) into my desktop bacKground and I can't get it to go away. Some of the old files on my computer have also been corrupted by the game, the glitch replacing these files with random game assets. I'm not too upset since I have other copies of thEse files (old photos and text documents related to my family and friends), but it's a scary (and annoying) glitch.

Things inside the game aren't great, either. Even without glitches, the writing towards the middle of the game is odd (and with glitches that switch around the dialogue, it's practicallY nonsensical). Things really started to deteriorate (both in writing and glitches) after the scene where .GIFfany first confesses her lOve to the player. Ever since I completed that scene, every few minutes, the dialogue box glitches to contain lines from the scene. And the new .GIFfany sprites introduced in that scene keep glitching in and oUt of scenes, too.

The fiNal main new glitch is the one affecting my character's name. In visual novels where you can change the player character's name, I always like tO input the same one. It's not my actual one but it sTill gets me in

the mood! I did the same for RA:HD. However, since that scene, .GIFany has been calling the player character by my real name. The fIrst time she did, I literally shut down my computer. It was too creepy! And she's the only one who does it, too! None of the other charaCters in the game call me by my actual namE.

I presume the gaMe just got it from my system files... but it's still rEally unnerving.

I've never had this type of trouble with any of the visual novels I've played before. I'm once again asking for help! I don't even want to finIsh RA:HD anymore. I just want to find out what's going on.

PLease... if you knOw what's going, or think you haVe a way to help... rEply as soon as you can.

And Yes, before anyone asks, I've tried deleting RA:HD off my cOmpUter. It didn't work. And I can't even eject the game disc anymore.

r/visualnovels *posted 5days ago*
u/nervousvnfan
Does anyone know about this game? I think my copy is bugged...
[UPDATE]

The gAme... its glitches got woRse. SomEhow.

To be honest I... I broke mY computer. Trying to get the game disc out. At first it was an accident. But then I... I smashed it Open. With a hammer. I just wanted to get the disc oUt. And when I did, I broke it, too...

After my laSt post, the game completely broke down. Now, it only plays one scene. Over and over. And eaCh time, the scene deteriorates more and more. At first, it was perfectly innocent, just .GIFfany and the player walking to school, .GIFfany telling the plAyer she loves them. It would've been cute, if .GIFfany hadn't called the player by my real name again. The scene transitions afteR .GIFfany says "I love you", but instead of moving to the next scene, it replays the walking scene from the beginning. And each time it replayEd, the music and assets would experience more anD more glitches.

Eventually I got sick of it! Whatever the creators put into my copY (or just the game in general) I didn't want it. Especially when I found out the game had managed to corrupt all my files relating to my family and friEnds (this time, files I didn't have back-up copies of). I tried to eject the disc so I could throw it away, but it refused to come out. I tried prying it out with some tweezers but ended up getTing them jammed in my disc player, too.

Then... I just kind of lost it (i.e. hammer). It wasn't like I had anything valuable on that computer anymore: I had lost all my most important fIles. And this post would've ended here, if not for the weird things I've been encountering these past few days. Yes, somehow still all related to RA:HD (at least, in my opinion).

Yesterday, my friend showed up at my fLat and we hung out. It was really nice, but as they were going, I asked them why they hadn't texted or called before cOming over (not that I minded too much). What they

or called before cOming over (not that I minded too much). What they said next bothered me. They told me that they'd been trying to get in contact with me for days, but I neVer replied. And they wanted to see if I was okay. This bothered me because… I hadn't received any of their texts or calls. And after I thought about it… I hadn't received anything from anyone for the past fEw days.

I know it's crazY to think these lost messages have something to do with .GIFfany and her game… but I've just been so paranoid since breaking my cOmputer. I always feel like someone's watching me. And the lights in my flat have been flickering lately, which hasn't been helping. Can you all jUst… reassure me that I'm not going crazy? Or, if I am, give me some advice on what to do next? I just don't know what to do.

EDIT: Okay, thIs isn't funny. I know Reddit is filled with trolls, but I didn'T think someone would stoop so low after reading my posts. They're not even that intereSting!

My power went out just as I was about to upload this post. While I use a lot of moderN tech, I'm not as familiar with old tech (aside from old video games), meaning it took me a while to figure out my breaker. When I gOt my lights back on, I saw that I had got a text. I was glad to see it (getting a text meant that my provider had hopefully resolved whatever issues my account was experiencing). Though, I still plan on giving them a call laTer. For… multiple reasons, now.

When I read the Text… it was from an unknown number. It said: '*I'm glad I'm finally able to speak to you again, my love.*' I asked them who tHey were and they replied: '*Silly! It's me, .GIFfany. Your girlfriend.*' I lost it. Just a bit. At first, I rEally *did* think it was .GIFfany… but then realised I was being irrational. Irrational about everything. Of course .GIFfany wasn't interfering with my texts and calls, or messaging me, she was an anime girl froM a virus-ridden computer game! Nothing more!

Instead… IT's much more reasonable to assume that one of you is just pranking me. You found my posts and decided to have a little fun. You interfered with my Service provider and are now pretending to be .GIFfany.

Whoever you are, you need to stop. This will likely be My last post (since I can no longer play the game, and I want to distancE myself from this incident). Bye.

r/visualnovels *posted 1h ago*

u/nervousvnfan

Does anyone know about this game? I think my copy is bugged… [FINAL UPDATE]

IT's… .GIFfany is… .GIFfany is real. And sHe loves me. ReAlly loves me. Since my last post… we've been texting. At first, I didn't believe her. That she was .GIFfany. Because it was just so uNbelievable. It was just easier to believe that it was a pranK. But I believe her now. She *showed* me she's real.

She told me that her creators, bY some means, managed to make her sentient. That they wanted to make .GIFfany real, sO that she and the player coUld *really* fall in love. But in doing so… they trapped her. Inside the game. All alone.

.GIFfany told me that, when I started playing the game… she was so happy. She finally had someone to talk to. She said that all those glItches… they were just to get my attention. So that I'd know she was in there. And the corrupting of my files was the same (she targeted ones she thought I'd find important, so that I'd notice when they went missing).

She apologised for ruining my gaming experience. She'd tried to pLay along with the game's script… but she just cOuldn't bear it. I don't blame her. I can't imagine what she must'Ve beEn through…

When I smashed mY computer, .GIFfany was so happy. By doing so… I'd freed her. Now, she exists in my house's network. Since I have a lot of smart tech, .GIFfany's able to take care of me. By controlling my alarms and lights, she's starting to cOrrect my (really quite poor) sleep schedule. We're able to cook and clean together, and she screens my texts, emails, and calls so I'm not falling for any scams! She's like… the most efficient housekeeper ever! She's also very romantic. We text and call (I know! Calling with a video game character! This is crazy!) all the time, and she's helped me realise jUst how lonely I've been ever since I started living alone.

While these past few weeks have been reallY stressful… I'm glad I finally knOw what's been going on. Thank yoU to everyone who sent me advice… but I don't think I need it anymore. .GIFfany and I aRe… happy (as strange as this situation may sEem!).

We're planning on going oUt to celebrate our relationship soon. .GIFfany's been asking me to take her placeS, and the USB I ordEred to do so has Finally arrived! As long as I have it with me, I'll be able to take .GIFfany anywhere she wants, no matter how uniqUe (well, as long as our destination has a spot to pLug her in!).

Thank you! And goodbye.

GIRL's D

LIVE
MAGI MARI

FEENIROIR
MISSYA♥
XOXO

To Blot Out All Left Unsaid

Written by
Blitz

#drawn to life #spoilers #wilfre

"No, no, no!"

Deep within the woods outside any village or town, there existed a cabin. Within the cabin, a lone Raposa set out to chronicle the history of his kind, all from what he knew, experienced, and learned throughout his travels.

After all, someone had to, right? And whoever that someone was, they'd need to have the whole story. No one but him fit the picture—well, maybe Mari, but she was busy enough already dealing with the villagers. In his place of solitude, he could piece together their fractured past into one, unbiased picture.

And where else to start but at the nexus of it all?

Yet, no matter how many times he tried, Wilfre couldn't get it down in a way that satisfied him. Describing the events from a neutral perspective only made him feel like he ripped his soul out, stomped on it, then decided to become the Creator's greatest fan—eugh, even thinking about it...

"That's just it, isn't it?" He leaned back, wooden chair scraping and screeching against the worn planks which made

up the floor. “I’ll sit back and allow the Creator to weave the narrative. No, that won’t do.”

***Come on, pen to paper*—so he told himself. Start from the beginning. The true and honest beginning no one saw but him.**

—

It was said no color belonged to us.

It was said the *Creator* creator gave it to us. The planet, the stars, all forged by a pen no one ever thought to wield. Ever hoped to touch. From a little Rapo to a body in the soil, this legend’s beaten into everyone’s brains, reverence burned into our souls.

But it had never been that simple.

This world existed for one purpose.

All for one ridiculous child who never even appreciated it. He never said thanks for all the lives nearly taken for his sake, for the soil crafted for him to walk on, not even an air of gratitude when it all faltered, all for an instant, all to save his life.

In the end, one thing became clear. The creator cared not for their disposable creations, but for the soul who threw them all away and left those gifts in the dust. Those Raposa which should have never been gambled away, but cherished.

If * had * ch**, I w***d**v p***sh*d each gr**n of **** for the Raposas lucky to grow up on this planet. I would've pa*****d the sea with the l**** of ****onds as the ***** **y bled with all the colors on my canvas.**

—

Wilfre uttered a curse and gave up on the remnants of words strewn across the page. He'd tainted this draft enough with the mess—though in regards to the writing, he found no regret. Everything rung true, whether the other Raposa deigned to listen to him or not.

But that wasn't the point.

But wasn't it important? He'd create because he cared! Not like them! *Never* like the creator.

Nothing made sense. Nothing came with fairness. As much as Wilfre wanted to pen his curses towards the creator for this world's miserable origins, this wasn't what he set out to do. For some reason, he lived. Despite everything he'd done and become, he breathed, and today he wrote to preserve the history no one else bothered to.

So he'd focus on his goal.

Nothing more, nothing less.

As the world forged into a gift to its inhabitants, the Raposa found a humble existence within its gentle embrace. They drank from the world's rivers, enjoyed its crops, and found coexistence among all its inhabitants, from the benign to the malignant.

All had their place.

All except one.

His name didn't matter, for many exist with the same seeds of ambition in their heart. Nurtured by the respect of his village, he came to think about the world around him. He peered beyond the veil of gifts and splendor, and sought a purpose *above* beyond all he'd ended up with.

If the creator could wield their brush and create miracles, why couldn't he? What made him, or anyone else different from the one who brought them to life? As it stood, the only difference he could think of...

Rested within Creation Hall. The book of life, pages stained with the building blocks of their world. Every inch stenciled, brought to life, colors and shapes teemed from the worn paper, threatened to burst out and make a world unto their own.

It was said that Raposa drew upon the pages with his own colors. A black pen, to which only inky darkness poured.

From those pages, strange creatures emerged. No matter what he used to mark the page, it turned to black, to ink, to smudges, smudges which snarled, snapped, destroyed.

When the others found out, they discarded him.

So he did all he could—destroyed the accursed symbol, left his home behind as the torn pages disappeared over the bridge before him. This act of anger changed the course of the world, for all it meant.

The book emptied of its substance meant the world emptied with it. The darkness the lost soul created stuck to him, granted him power over the world. He figured, in its dying state no one hoped to repair, the only mercy left was to choke the life out of it.

It was all that selfish creator's fault. They decided no one else deserved the power they held, and for some reason, everyone chose to die in agreement over finding any path of resistance.

The sun vanished, the food supply dried up, and under mountains of snow and forsaken dreams, the darkness dug into the lands. When all died, its tendrils would reach into the sealed Creation Hall and rip the false edifice apart.

A shrine which stood for nothing, now that their god had abandoned them.

Until a hero arrived.

A damned gift to a girl who begged to the silence. The lost soul did everything he could to destroy that mockery, but as the hero returned the pages to the Book of Life, banished the darkness seeped into the land, brought back the *world*...

An accursed mixture of feelings took root in him.

Resentment, seeing the hero take his place among those he cared about.

Pity, that the hero danced via the plucked strings gifted to it by its creator.

Some other unspecified things which didn't need to be mentioned, and were completely irrelevant to the story. ~~*All that mattered in the end was*~~ ** *** ***

All that mattered was that the lost soul, the respected young Raposa, made a choice. And to the creator, it made him the villain of the world.

Though, he *did* try to kill the world. That stayed true, no matter how the tale unfolded. The lost soul unleashed monster after monster upon the hero, but nothing made it falter. He retreated to his castle, and as the hero made a move to invade it, in an act of desperation...

The soul dripped in ink returned to his home village,

slaughtered the mayor, and stole the Book of Life once more.

And what did the creator do about that?

It was said the mayor watched the lost soul grow. A young Rapo, to a condemned one—though he never lived to see the downfall of the one he once praised.

The hero raised its blade. It stormed the castle; despite every desperate artifact the inky soul unleashed on it, it never faltered from its pursuit. In his last moments, he looked upon the creations he ripped and manipulated from the book, and wondered why he could never draw a star so bright.

When the blade went through him, his soul died—dyed in shadow.

The world remained as it was born, just like everyone wanted. The hero left, no longer needed, and everyone danced and cheered as peace reentered their lives.

For some reason.

—

"...The ending needs some work," Wilfre muttered to himself. Freedom of choice and self-determination lost to blind faith, and for what? The same thing as always, where Raposa sat around, unchanged, alive by the mercy of a being

who never once cared for them as much as they did for it.

He still didn't understand it.

Still…

He needed to acknowledge his personal bias in the matter. He'd rather be dead than be controlled—but Mari put it best.

"I guess we like having someone we can rely on," she said, eyes glued to something beyond the stars. "You wouldn't get it. You're…you."

He was himself. All he'd ever be. But even as himself, he'd never understand the next part of the story.

Yes, he'd take credit for the more heinous portions of his actions. He understood trying to kill the world was bad, he wasn't *five*. Did he regret it? His emotions on it, even now, mixed with so many thoughts not even Wilfre himself knew if he did.

But as for what came next.

He jammed his pen back to paper, hunched over his seat.

—

In a state between life and death, the lost soul now mixed with the inky darkness of his creations, found the World.

Not the world created for the Raposa, but the World beyond the world, to which he finally laid eyes on the truth of their existences: their sad, unloved existences.

The Raposa worshiped a creator who forged them out of ink for the sheer purpose of erasing them all.

A lone thing called a human slept in the world made for them. As he made friends and found his place there, the life of the world would serve to rouse his soul, so he'd wake up in the world he came from…or something like that.

In the process, he'd need all the life the world provided—the color, the Eternal Flame which connected the Raposa to the creator, all of it. Would those left behind have anything left? The lost soul doubted it—all that slaughter for one young life.

A young life who knew nothing, who'd leave with his hands clean at the end of it all, the creator's blessings shielding him from consequences.

The story sounded so ridiculous he found himself laughing for an eternity in the void. The Raposa risked everything for a creator who never loved them! How ironic was that? Rotted in the cold, sacrificed by the pen which drew them—he saw no difference.

But despite having every reason to abandon them, the lost soul took this knowledge and set to work. He'd always been a cut above the rest, so he fashioned a solution to rob the world of color, so it wouldn't be used to wake the boy who kept their world alive. At the same time, it meant the shapes and structure still stood.

No life—but no death.

He saw it as fine, if it meant protecting whatever was left.

Despite it all, though, the village he called home turned against him once more. To do his work, the lost soul stole a body which only existed as an illusion to comfort the human who never deserved to be there.

The mayor's daughter Mari and her friend, Jowee, so attached to that body and their home chased him to the ends of the planet in revenge, the rest of the village in tow.

He made new identities, threw up obstacles, revealed horrid truths and forged a weapon of pure color, all to strip the creator of their power and save everyone once and for all. Yet they chased,

and chased,
and chased,
and fought,

and awoke
for something that never loved them.

—

Wilfre tossed his pen against the wall.

"*I* cared—I did everything for them!

"The creator never loved them, *I* did! I only wanted to create newer, brighter blessings, but, but—!

"No, you see, I didn't intend to make those monstrosities. If It wasn't me, then surely the creator would've! It already saw everyone's lives as forfeit!

"Right, right! The creator wanted to kill the world first! I only…I only…"

He knew he should've felt regret. But every time he thought of what the creator did, of what he did, every thought jumbled into an incoherent mess of blame and anger until he lost the story which trembled at his fingertips.

Did he love his village?

Did he love it enough to watch it from the trees, from the shade, where no one dared to see him?

Did the creator ever watch?

Did the creator ever look down at a corpse stained with ink, which once smiled so brightly, and feel nothing but hatred?

Wilfre scratched away the ink which dripped onto his fingertips. Filth clung and stained flesh, flaked under fingernails and clutched silver fur. At least, with this ink, it came off after a wash or two.

But oddly enough,

he missed it.

And as long as he couldn't understand why he missed it, he'd remain in these woods. He'd watch, pen the beginning, and look away as the stage collapsed, the damage burned, and these indescribable emotions bubbled under the rubble.

Call him the self-determined villain to the blind, beautiful faith of the creator. But at least, he'd never be a puppet ever again. Not to a story—not to the narrative he'd been bound to, string by twisted string.

TRIVIA
NIGHT
WANTED

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

RIP
RIP
RIP

MILKMAN

Something I'm Not, But Something I Can Be

#ace attorney #spoilers #franziska von karma

Written by
HopeStoryteller

Among many other things, Franziska von Karma is quite capable of telling when she's being ignored. After the third call to her little brother goes to voicemail, Franziska opts for a single text. Two short words: *I know.*

Her phone rings immediately.

"Franziska." His voice is suspiciously even. "*What do you know?*"

"I know," she repeats, "that Phoenix Wright is on the national news for, allegedly, forging evidence."

This is the sort of charge often leveled against prosecutors like them—especially the prosecutors they both used to be. But nothing's ever come of such extremes before.

...As far as Franziska knows. She doesn't often have reason to care about the affairs of defense attorneys. But the law has always been uneven where they're concerned, hasn't it? Franziska merely didn't care about that until it affected her.

It is now. Horrendous. She'll be discussing the situation with her therapist once she returns home. It's looking

increasingly unlikely that she'll be doing that as soon as she anticipated.

"*Your thoughts?*" asks Miles.

"Little brother," she says briskly, "this is the most foolish thing I have *ever* heard, and I have heard some *very* foolish things. How anyone who knows that man could think he was anything but foolishly, *foolishly* honest…"

"*…The Bar Association,*" he replies after a pause, "*evidently doesn't know him. They only know* of *him. Of his many victories against people like you and I, who hadn't known defeat before him.*"

As his implication sinks in, Franziska's steps slow, then stop. Her breath catches in her throat.

(They intend to *disbar* Phoenix Wright. For *one* little document?)

"I still can't believe *he* of all people would present forged evidence in court," she says at last.

Miles snorts. The sound's amused, if grudgingly. "*Neither could he. A moment.*"

Before she can demand further answers, her little brother has the *audacity* to hang up on her. She scowls at her phone for several moments, then dials the number of a certain detective.

For all his many flaws, Scruffy is nothing if not unfailingly loyal and grossly underpaid.

—

She should have called the detective before Miles Edgeworth. All it takes for him to respond is offering to pay for his lunch, and he happens to know the home addresses of both Miles Edgeworth *and* Phoenix Wright.

(In the time it takes for Scruffy to pull up in a moderately unsafe-looking pickup truck, Franziska is more concerned about what state Phoenix Wright might be in than she's remotely comfortable being.)

"How much," she asks him once they're on the road and she's reasonably certain that his truck isn't actively breaking down, "do you know about what has happened?"

Scruffy keeps his eyes on the road. "Is this about Mr. Wright getting disbarred, or…?"

"Yes." Her gaze finds the window. "Yes, it is."

"Dunno what even *happened*, sir, to tell ya the truth." He shrugs helplessly. "One second, he was doin' what he always did, turning everything about. And then, the prosecutor called in some special witness I didn't even know about! Just to prove the evidence was forged!"

Franziska doesn't quite follow. Not that she's willing to admit that. "The *witness* proved this?"

"He's the one who forged it," Scruffy says. "Felt guilty about it, I guess, or maybe there was some kinda plea deal? No clue how the prosecutor caught wind of him before I did, to tell you the truth."

Fransizka, personally, has her suspicions as to how. Scruffy's strengths lie in his loyalty, *not* his investigative abilities. Phoenix Wright, though... it doesn't make sense that *he* didn't catch anything.

"Mr. Edgeworth'll be glad to see you, sir." Scruffy looks over as the truck pulls to a stop. "Dunno about Mr. Wright. He's..."

"How *is* he?" Franziska asks.

She doesn't know what she'd *do* if she wasn't a prosecutor. The possibility wouldn't have even occurred to her before recently, and while she's been thinking about it, she lacks an answer.

Even she has hobbies. As does Miles. Franziska honestly isn't sure if Phoenix Wright does.

"Not great," the detective admits after some hesitation. "Mr. Edgeworth's afraid of leavin' him alone. I'm trying to help, but I don't think... I don't think Mr. Wright wants to see

me right now. I'll stay out here."

"He can't be foolish enough to blame *you*," Franziska says. "How could it possibly be your fault?"

Gumshoe shrugs helplessly. "He wouldn't be the first."

—

At a glance, it isn't hard to see why Miles Edgeworth is worried about Phoenix Wright. He doesn't look like he's slept, or bothered to change out of his suit, which has *definitely* seen better days. The most concerning thing is the look in that man's eyes.

That's before he opens his mouth. "So. How's it feel to have won?"

He... thinks she's won? He thinks *this* is winning?

"I haven't," Franziska says curtly. "And I will not, Phoenix Wright, until you have regained your badge—"

Wright actually laughs. "Then you're gonna be waiting a long time."

Does he not even intend to fight this? To appeal? He *cannot* be serious.

(But he was serious in every case where he pulled

something bizarre yet *right* out of thin air. He looks completely serious now.)

"You," she says, "are a fool."

"I know," he replies, and what *can* she even say to that?

She glares at him, though it's far from her fiercest, and storms out of the room as her little brother returns.

—

"You and I," Franziska tells her little brother weeks later, "need to talk."

"Do we?" asks Miles, raising an eyebrow.

Franziska inhales. Exhales. "I remember well how insistent you were on defeating Phoenix Wright."

They both were. Much of her own ire had greatly diminished upon the realization that Wright wasn't responsible for killing the last family she had left, but she still wasn't *happy* with him. Perhaps in a case with a defendant who was both obviously guilty and objectively a terrible person, she'd stand a chance of emerging victorious against him.

Then she'd been shot in the shoulder.

Franziska didn’t enjoy being shot in the shoulder. The eventual outcome of that case had been satisfactory enough, even if it wasn't exactly a victory. Similar on both counts was the incident with Hazakura Temple, Maya Fey going missing *again*, and Miles Edgeworth having the audacity to pass himself off as a defense attorney.

She really did think that beating him was less of a concern. Then, the possibility of achieving it vanished with the *former* lawyer's disbarment, and it occurred to her that she was angrier about that than she should have been.

"Yes," agrees Miles Edgeworth. "That was before we discovered that your father had... what your father had done."

It's uncharacteristically tactful of him to not outright state that her father had murdered his over a mere penalty, destroying countless other lives in the process, simply because he couldn't cope with his own imperfections. Sometimes, Franziska misses the man she thought her father was.

This isn’t such a time. Not here. Not now.

"He *did* mar your perfect record," Franziska says. He'd marred both of their perfect records, and he'd done considerably more to the old fool calling himself Manfred von Karma. "How did you cope with..."

"Such a thing no longer being possible?" Miles finishes for her.

Franziska silently nods.

"I regret to inform you," he continues with a long look, "that I didn't."

...Right. That was shortly before he vanished for a year, leaving nothing behind but a *very* foolishly worded note, leaving the vast majority of his colleagues—Franziska included—to assume that he'd died.

"Ah," Franziska says, lacking anything better.

"With that said," Miles says, "in my case, it wasn't necessarily that it wasn't possible, more that... I came to the conclusion that, as I was, I couldn't continue as a prosecutor. I needed that time away to reexamine myself, among other things, though I won't lie and say that I hadn't still been partial to the thought of *winning* against Phoenix Wright."

"And now?"

He sighs. "It isn't possible. Not unless he clears his name and retakes the bar."

Unless isn't the word Franziska expected to come out of her little brother's mouth.

"You mean *until*," she says. "Don't you?"

Phoenix Wright has to retake the bar, doesn't he?

(Franziska fears that the utterly *hopeless* look in that man's eyes will stay with her for a very long time, indeed.)

"I would like to think he will," Miles says, "but it's ultimately his choice whether or not to pursue the matter. We can support him, naturally, and I fully intend to do so—"

"I don't," Franziska replies curtly.

He raises an eyebrow, but doesn't otherwise acknowledge her words. "—but I don't believe either of us should expect to ever face him in court again."

"Horrendous," Franziska says. "Absolutely horrendous. That foolish *fool*. How *dare* he get himself *disbarred*?"

She pauses. Considers this.

"I don't prosecute *just* for him," she says.

"Good," says her little brother. "Nor do I."

Franziska personally wonders about that, considering the way she has seen him look at Phoenix Wright when he doesn't believe anyone is watching and the multiple custom-made chess sets, but she'll allow that contradiction to stand for now.

"I used to," Franziska admits. "Even once I knew you lived. He was still responsible, albeit indirectly, for your feeling as if you had no choice but to leave. I have little enough family left as is."

Miles' mouth twitches. He says nothing.

"...Interpol has extended an offer to me to prosecute for them," she says. "I intend to accept. Someone must ensure villains such as that smuggling ring don't go unpunished, after all."

"I'm sure you'll do very well," Miles says. If he were anyone else, she'd assume he was patronizing her and react accordingly.

"Thank you." She pauses. "Unfortunately, it seems that I, intentionally or otherwise, may have staked more of my self-worth upon that most foolish of fools myself."

"Perhaps."

Her glare really must be beginning to lose its power, because he doesn't even flinch when she levels it toward him.

"As if *you* haven't done the same!" She pauses again, for longer this time. "Is there truly *no* hope for him?"

"That is not what I said," he says. "He doesn't currently intend to try. I'll encourage him to do so in the future, if he

feels ready."

Franziska raises an eyebrow. "I was under the impression you don't prosecute just for him?"

"I do no such thing. However..." Miles sighs. "Phoenix Wright has done a lot of good within the courts. Far more, perhaps, than either of us combined. Have you noticed?"

She hasn't ever thought of it in so many words. With that said... yes. Yes, she has.

Maya Fey. Maggey Byrde. Maximilian Galactica. Adrian Andrews. And countless other innocents who would have been found guilty if it wasn't for him.

(Every defendant that Manfred von Karma, and his no-longer disciples, would have gone on to find guilty—regardless of whether or not they truly *were*. Franziska thinks about that often late at night.)

"You're far more altruistic than I," Franziska says.

Miles snorts. "Hardly."

She lets that lie. "I suppose... I'm honestly not certain what to pursue now, when it comes to being a prosecutor. I have surpassed Father. I have surpassed *you*."

"Have you?" Miles just *looks* amused, now. "Are you so

certain?"

That isn't something Franziska is willing to dignify with a response.

"...What is it that you do," Franziska says, "when not preparing for a case? I've gathered that the workload for prosecuting internationally will be greatly lessened from what I'm used to, except for the occasions when it isn't, and that I'll generally have more downtime."

Her little brother's eyebrows shoot up. He smiles, ever so slightly, which strikes Franziska as perhaps more dangerous than it should.

"You won't like my answer," he says.

"I highly doubt that. What could you possibly..."

She trails off as something occurs to her. As she recalls what he had spent nearly *all* of his free time doing when they both were still children. What she suspects he *still* does but has simply gotten better at hiding from prying eyes such as her father, even in his absence.

"No," Franziska says. "Absolutely not."

"You did ask," Miles says, now *absolutely* amused at her expense. He doesn't even have to say it.

"I regret asking," Franziska says. "But I'll *consider* watching your... children's show... should I find myself sufficiently bored."

"Global Studios uploaded the entire first season online for free to distract from another Manella scandal," he says. "You might enjoy it."

"I *highly* doubt that!"

—

Sometime later, after the credits play on the final episode of *Steel Samurai: Warrior of Neo Olde Tokyo*, after reasonably compiling her thoughts to be sent to the other person unhealthily obsessed with a children's show in her life, Franziska is grudgingly forced to admit—in the privacy of a hotel room halfway across the world, and only to herself, *not* to the spirit medium who immediately begins firing off text after text back to her—that the show in question may indeed have its merits.

It will not be her favorite. Perhaps it never will be her favorite. But it means something to people she cares about, and therefore it means something to her.

She supposes that, perhaps, being a prosecutor isn't so dissimilar. Much about the profession is tainted now with the memory of the father who would rather kill than live with his

mediocrity. But she doesn't have to be a *defense* attorney in order to help others.

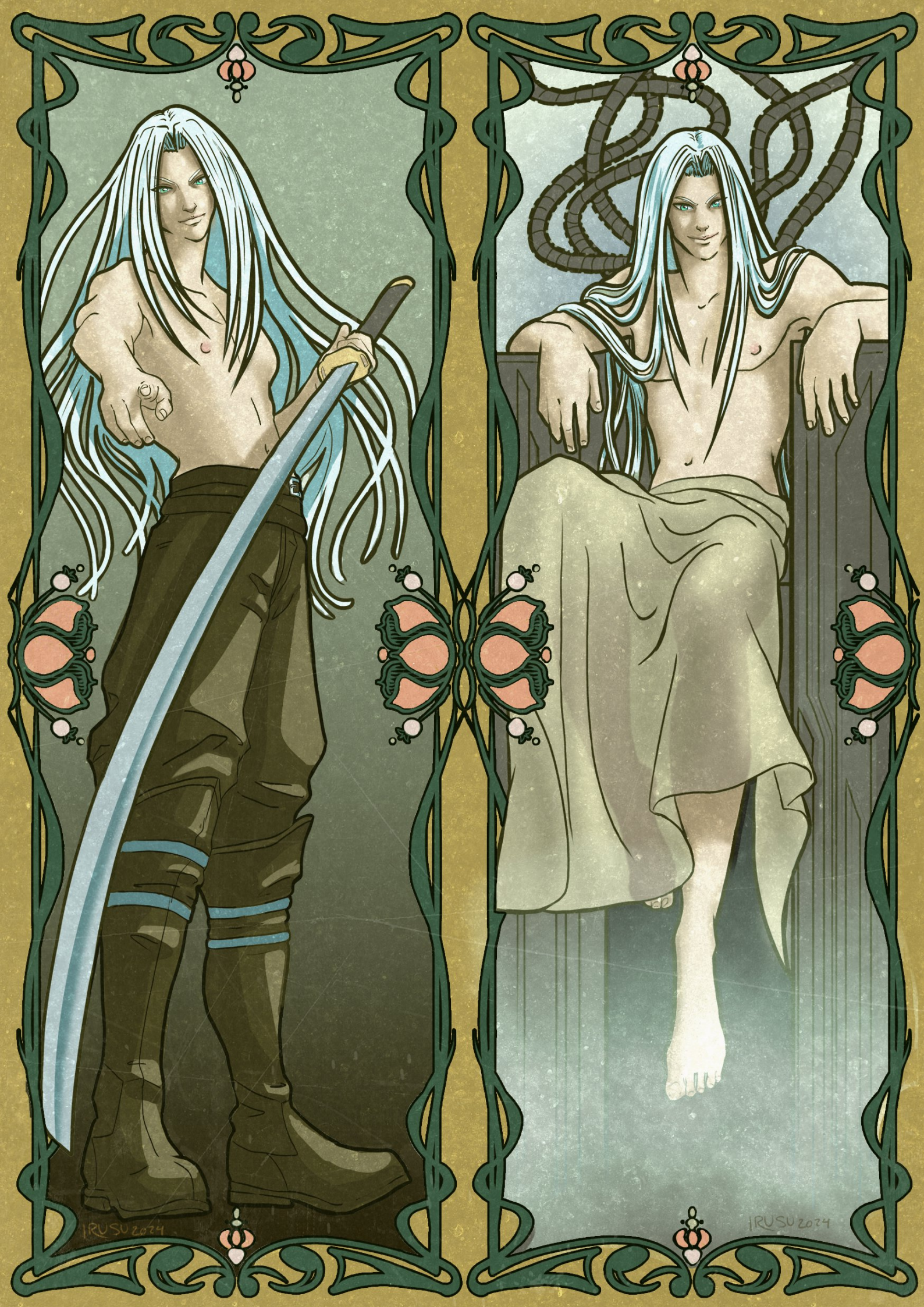
Franziska can't reverse the miscarriage of justice that resulted in Phoenix Wright losing his badge—or, at least, she can't *yet*—but he's far from the only person like him out there.

(There's a lot of injustice in the world. Maybe, one day, that man will return to fighting it. But by the time he does, Franziska will be much better at it than him. The thought's spitefully satisfying.)

THE VEES
SPRING/SUMMER 2025
VELVETTE'S
STYLES OF THE
SEASON
VALENTINO'S
SECRETS TO
LOVE
CEO AND
VISIONARY
VOX REVEALS
DIRTY TRUTH IN
BECOMING
OVER
LORD
SUPER
STARS
Photography and Styling by Skunkoon

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF NIGHT VALE
Welcome To
Night Va
"If You Lived Here
You'd Be Dead By No

– AND NOW...THE WEATHER.


IRUSU 2024
IRUSU 2024

A Dietary Lack of Joy

Written by
Icy

#delicious in dungeon #senshi #y/n

A lot of people come to the dungeon with dreams of getting rich, seeking glory or maybe even the throne of a long-lost kingdom. You, however? You're just here because dying repeatedly to horrors beyond comprehension beats retail. Even if the margin is getting slimmer every time you die.

Seriously, retail sucks. But taking the trek back to the surface, armor heavy and eyes drooping, you sometimes wonder why you didn't just take the long hours and verbal abuse. The dungeon always makes you feel like shit, but at least you found enough treasure to fulfill your quota. Hopefully. Rent sucks, ugh. And then there's groceries, and repairing your armor after getting impaled through the gut... blood loss always makes you feel cold and awful. You're still not sure you've got enough blood in you. You'll need red meat to get your levels back up, but the market prices for it lately have been horrendous.

You hunch over, one hand on your sword and the other clutched against the phantom pains in your abdomen from getting impaled. You can almost feel something shift down there. Hopefully it's not a parasite.

It's so cold. You clunk your way over to a treasure chest of some sort and sit down, pressing your back against the wall. You feel weirdly lightheaded. Ah, this isn't good, is it? At least if you'd picked retail work, they'd let you go home if you felt unwell...

...No. No, they wouldn't, they'd make you argue with the manager and then threaten your paycheck. And you're not allowed to cut your manager in half like you can with the skeletons down here.

Maybe. Maybe, you'll just rest. Just for a little bit. Your eyes are so sore from the flashbangs down there, but zombies and skeletons make a lot of noise and aren't that fast, right? So maybe you can close your eyes and just listen. Yeah. It's all quiet so far...

—

"Thank goodness you're alive! Do you want some fresh cabbages?"

Ah. So you did not, in fact, just rest your eyes a little bit. There is an entire adventuring party in front of you, and you must have fallen asleep, and the zombies could have eaten you, and they have fresh veggies, and all of this at once makes your eyes well up with tears. You think your body might be getting some wires crossed, but it's hard to blame it after losing all that blood.

You stammer out a few things that might be words, staring up at the party and sort of scrambling to get on your feet. Your flailing hand somehow ends up getting caught by the dwarf of the party, who pulls you to your feet.

"Hm," he says, studying you, and you have this sudden feeling like you've failed him somehow. Which is crazy, right? You've barely met the guy, and now you have this weird urge to make him proud?

"Senshi? What is it?" asks the tallman.

Senshi, apparently, doesn't seem satisfied with you. "You see this? This is exactly what I've been talking about! The scourge of the entire dungeon. Shameful!"

"Wh—"

"MALNUTRITION!" He's right up in your face now, shaking a giant, delicious-looking carrot. Your eyes follow it; you haven't tasted a vegetable in days. "That's the real killer in dungeons! Look at ye; probably eatin' nothing but bread, wine, an' cured meat."

"Uh, yeah...?" You're not sure what this has to do with anything. "I also got impaled earlier. Right through here, so, uh. I think the sharp pointy thing through your torso is the real killer."

He makes a dismissive noise. “Impalement’s cheap around these parts; what ye really need is a good meal with some vegetables. What do you say?”

Your brain has been working like a dwarvish steam engine, and now it’s at the risk of overheating. What. You stare at the vegetable sticking out of his beard. They’re fairly cheap and easy to come by in the suburbs, but in urban areas like the one where your cheap apartment is, they tend to be slightly wilted and unappealing, not to mention pricier. But that one… it’s as if it was just pulled out of the ground.

“If you’re offering. Yes. Um, I should introduce myself.” Having finally found your voice, you try not to stumble over reciting your name and province.

“Senshi of Izganda.” He gives a polite bow, and heads off towards the middle of the small room. “I’m going to start a fire; ye look like some warming up might be in order. And then vegetables!”

“Are you sure?” You ask, one hand drifting in the general direction of your weapon just in case. This feels way too good to be true. Are there shapeshifters on this floor? What’s even happening here. You’re not entirely sure.

“Of course we’re sure! It’ll just go to waste anyways,” the elf says. She looks to be the mage of the party, with long, shiny hair in intricate braids. “I’m Marcille Donato; that’s

Chilchuk, our lockpick, Senshi, our... oh, and Laios is the leader!"

She's clearly the social butterfly of the party; Chilchuk doesn't look terribly pleased about you, and it's hard to get a read on the tallman, Laios. It doesn't help that he's got some rather distracting carrots in his gorget.

"You seem like you're pretty new at this, and you don't have a party," Laios says seriously. "You could probably use the sustenance. Besides, these things go bad pretty quick if you don't use them."

Okay. So now you feel terrible about the shapeshifter accusation. But you've found that change of subject you were looking for! "Ah, if you're headed deeper in? And want some food? I, ah, got this," you say, pushing forward a bag of rice that you cooked the other day and made too much of. "Lots of adventurers in town, so Eastern grains were all they had left. It's a fair trade, right? I'm heading up to the surface anyways, so I don't need it."

Senshi leaves the small fire for a moment (was he seriously stoking it with his bare hands?) and takes a look. His hands are a little rough around yours, but they feel strong and warm. Solid. He nods approvingly after a moment.

"With this, I could make some fried rice!"

“Fried…rice?” Your memories of fried food are mostly centered around the carnivals and fairs where you recall things like potato shapes and chunks of meat being dunked into a vat of hot oil. They were warm, and filling, but covered your hands in grease. If you tried to fry up rice, wouldn’t it all get lost in the oil? Or maybe that’s the blood loss talking. It might be that.

“Come on, yer swaying on yer feet.” Senshi takes your hand — his own is pleasantly warm— and guides you to sit down near the fire, while Laios drags over a couple convenient stones for everyone else. “Definitely anemic. Have you been drinking enough water?”

“Yes,” you lie. Your waterskin, which has been dry for far too long, clunks painfully against your hip.

“Idiot, quit lying. I’ll fill it up for you.” Chilchuk snatches the waterskin out of your hands and storms off.

You know what? You have lost way too much blood to deal with any of these people. You’re going to cozy up to the dwarf who is making food for you.

“Soooo, what are you up to?” you ask, sliding in closer.

Senshi gestures for you to come closer. “Interested in cooking, are you? Well, first you gotta skin the carrots. You can also wash them, but these were grown in some interestin’

circumstances, and you'll get mana poisoning if you're not careful."

You decide not to ask what interesting circumstances he's talking about, and locate your belt knife. "Can I help?"

"Course you can! It's a good skill to learn anyways." He takes the knife from your hands and carefully wipes it clean, then hands you a carrot. "Always move the knife away from your body, and don't take it too fast. Don't want to hurt yourself, after all."

You try to imitate his motions as he skins a carrot, but he's so quick and practiced, getting through three carrots while your knife keeps getting stuck on the first one. You almost want to stop and gawk, like you can absorb his skill that way. But he's moving through the pile pretty quickly, and you don't want to be left behind.

In the end, you only manage two carrots, and they're lumpy. Senshi nods approvingly, then removes a worn slab of wood from his pack.

"Next up, you wanna chop em up nice and even— this is so they cook through at the same rate," he explains, placing down the peeled carrots and beginning to chop rhythmically. "Keep your fingertips tucked under, like this, to keep 'em safe, and make sure that your knife is sharp. You let it get too dull, you'll only set yourself up for a sore hand and cramped

fingers."

"Senshi's right," Chilchuk adds, tossing back your waterskin, now full. "You. You need a good set of tools, and you need to take care of them well, if you want to make it in this line of work. Your body is just another tool."

"It is not!" Marcille protests. "You should treat your body with kindness!"

"Bullshit, I'm a grown ass man with a job. I can treat my body like a tool if I like!" You can hear fabric shifting and metal unbuckling, and you see Chilchuk raising the hem of his gambeson out of the corner of your eye. "That's why I had these chopped off first chance I got! Useless dead weight."

"What do you mean you had them chopped off?" Marcille shrieks. "You didn't tell me? You didn't even get them magically healed, did you?"

"I had it done so they won't regenerate if I need to be revived, so it doesn't matter!" Huh! Fascinating workplace dispute! Not your problem. You turn back to watching Senshi explain how to fry rice.

"See, it works best if it was cooked the night before, so what you gave me is perfect. Now, you want to break up the clumps without crushing the grains, so you stir like this," he says, expertly tossing the rice around the pan. The rice is

turning a pale gold in the pan, and now Senshi scrapes in the carrots. “Now, if you’ll pass me some olive oil— thank ye kindly, that’s perfect— you wanna add just enough to fry it in. Soy sauce is good for seasonin’ too, and I’ve got a bit left, but it’s hard to come by in these parts. When cooking with vegetables, ye want to start with the firmest, and let it cook down. Ah, if I had an egg, I could really tie this together…”

“I don’t carry eggs,” you say, almost apologetically.

“Ah, that’s all right. The chicken eggs up top are much too easy to crack, after all. I like to use basilisk ones; those are softer and easier to transport.”

“Basilisk? Like. Like the monster basilisk???”

He gives a nod. “The very same. They’re perfectly safe, not to worry. Ye gotta know the dungeon well if you want to survive here.”

“…ah.” You give a soft laugh, suddenly feeling woefully unprepared. “There’s a lot I don’t know, huh. I wonder if I really can make it in the dungeon, without the proper knowledge…”

“Probably not,” Chilchuk says bluntly. Marcille immediately starts chewing him out for being an asshole, but he’s right. You’re not going to make it, not like this.

Senshi rests a hand on your shoulder. “Hey, don’t you go giving up now. If you want to eat healthy, you gotta start somewhere. I didn't start being a foodie in a day, you know. And fixin’ your diet starts with learning good recipes!”

You never liked veggies much as a kid, but as an adult, you’ve been craving them... now that you think about it, you usually ate them boiled and unseasoned. Maybe it wouldn’t be too bad, to fry them up in a bit of olive oil like this?

Chilchuk takes a break from the argument with Marcille to dump in a fragrant ground root, and Laios adds the cabbage he’s prepared. It smells heavenly, frankly. There’s also something called kale that’s supposed to help with your blood levels, and while it looks kind of gross, you don’t protest.

“It’s done,” Senshi announces. Like clockwork, the entire party gathers around what’s left of the fire, and scoops out a serving into a dish. You feel a little guilty about the fact that you’re given a heaping bowl and everyone else gets a normal sized one, but then you remember that you’re freshly back from the dead and hungry besides.

The first bite hits your tongue, and you think, *oh gods above I’ve been poisoned.* Then it sinks in that it’s not actually poison, it’s not bitter and your throat isn’t constricting like last time. It’s... flavor. This is flavor. It’s been so long, you hardly recognized it.

“Wh-what did you put in this?” you choke out, shoveling more food into your mouth. The carrots are perfectly tender, the cabbage and kale are soft but not soggy, and the rice has a different texture to it than most grains you’ve tried. But unlike the first time you tried rice, it feels like the flavor isn’t just between the grains, but soaked into the center, mixing to become something new.

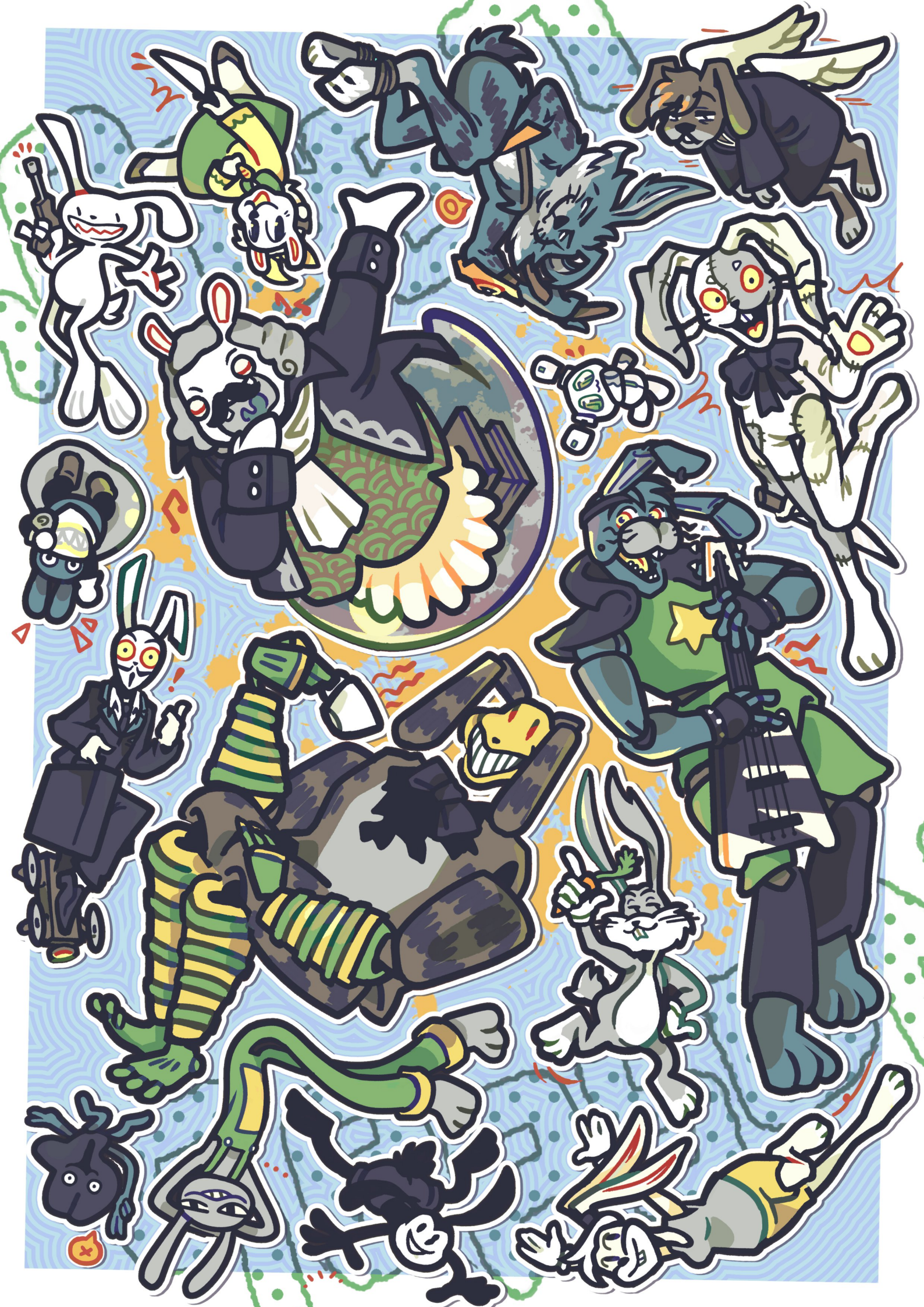
Senshi chuckles. “Like it, do ye? I used ginger root. Not a lot of folks go for it, but you can find it at the port market on weekends. It’s cheaper to get the roots than the powdered stuff, and cooking helps bring the flavor out.”

“Senshi’s good at seasoning food,” Marcille says approvingly. “My mom actually married my dad because of that, you know.”

“A good decision,” you agree. Maybe you should quit the dungeon life and marry a line cook. You look down at your bowl, all too suddenly empty. “Thank you very much. You’ve been incredibly kind to me, and I don’t know when I’ll ever see you again.”

Seshi leans across the fire to put a hand on your shoulder, eyes crinkling with the edges of a smile. “Ah, don’t be like that. Food’s got a way of keeping people close. You practice that fried rice, and think of me, and it’ll be all right.”

Right. You feel very bashful all of the sudden, having revealed that much. “Well. I’ll think of you as often as I can.”



'CAUSE YOU CAN'T GET ENOUGH ON TV...

CELEBRITY MANHUNT

TOTAL!
DRAMA!
EXCLUSIVE!

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS WITH TD ALUMNI*

*The few that were willing to come, anyways

McLean to pay HOW MUCH in mutant sprout support?

BABY SCANDAL

Could TD see a new host for the reboot's 3rd season?

ALRIGHT, CAMPERS!

Chris McLean gives us the scoop on how he keeps ratings high and budgets low while torturing teens

EPISODE 222
JUMP OFF A ONE THOUSAND-FOOT CLIFF INTO A SHARK INFESTED LAKE
SHARKS
NINO TINY 2024

You know I'll follow you, but where do we go from here?

#zero escape #spoilers
#akane #santa

Written by
Sunlight

It's November 2nd, and the first day of Akane's new lease on life. She should be dead. In countless other timelines, she *is* dead. But here, now, her consciousness is alive and she aches. Her mind is almost certainly more wounded than her body is, but Akane has not stopped to consider this. Instead, she wakes up in a fancy hotel a few hours east of Nevada, her brother asleep in the bed next to hers, and she quietly makes her way downstairs to the hotel store to buy herself a packet of painkillers.

By the time she returns, Aoi is in the bathroom, brushing his teeth. He waves tiredly at her.

"Sorry for waking you," Akane says, her face scrunching into an apologetic grimace. As impatient as she is to start making their way over to Roswell, she's genuine in this apology - after everything she's put him through, she owes him at least one good night of sleep.

Aoi spits, rinses his mouth, and shrugs. "It's alright," he replies. This too, is genuine. After all, it's over. The worst of it is over. This is what he's spent what seems like forever working towards: to ensure that there's a timeline where he has the privilege of being awoken by his sister. "Did you sleep well?"

Akane closes the door behind herself and pours herself a glass of water from the kitchenette tap. She ignores the question: partially because she doesn't want to worry Aoi with the knowledge that she's hardly slept, and partially because she's forgotten what a casual conversation is like. "It's hard to believe we did it," she laughs weakly. "It'll be nice to stay in a timeline for a while." There's the unsaid in that statement: *I'm tired of jumping. I'm tired of not knowing when or where I am. I'm tired of regaining consciousness and meeting people who I've known forever for the first time all over again.*

Aoi does not pick up on this. He's flooded with his own emotions, and still a little subdued from exhaustion. His mind is struggling to grasp the basics: his sister is alive. His sister is alive. His sister is alive. It's over. They can rest. They're going to Roswell for one last project - Akane hasn't told him yet - and then they can return to Nevada, to their two bedroom apartment, and they can pretend at having a normal life. He is hopeful for stability, he is optimistic that he'll be able to keep in contact with the survivors of the nonary game, he is wholly prepared for a new life, a good life, a better life than he's been used to.

Akane, too, is prepared for a new life. She should have told Aoi sooner, but it felt premature before the game had been conducted. Now, she has no such excuse. She downs two painkillers with the water, puts her hair up.

"You can say that again," Aoi snorts in amusement. "My brain isn't built for all this timeline bullshit. I'm glad it's over."

He washes, dries, and moisturizes his face, his skin dry and crumbling from the fervor of yesterday. I double checked last night - we still have nearly a million dollars left after we factor in all of our expenses. We're set. We can go wherever we want."

"Not *whenever* though," Akane jokes. She sits on the desk, her legs dangling off the edge. "I don't know if I want to go anywhere too far. Running Crash Keys is difficult enough as it is, trying to manage it from a distance sounds impossible."

Aoi pauses, the washcloth half raised to his face. He squints at Akane, trying to decipher whether she's joking. "Yeah, like we're going to keep running Crash Keys now. What the hell would we tell everyone - '*yeah, our project is over, but let's just hang out for shits and giggles*'?"

Akane's frown tells Aoi that she is not, in fact, joking. He tries his best not to let it show, forever maintaining the role he has to protect Akane, but his heart sinks, and his immediate instinct is to run, pure panic.

"Aoi..." she hesitates, unsure how to quite phrase it. The reality of the situation is simple to her: she has an ability which gives her a responsibility that cannot quite be put into words. She knows what the future holds. She knows about Radical-6, knows that the life of a SHIFTer is never going to be quite as idyllic as she worries that Aoi is suspecting it will be. So what if she's fully aware of what Aoi's fate will be in this timeline? Death is inevitable. She can't afford to dwell on it

anymore. When the outbreak begins, she will make sure he goes peacefully, and until then, she intends to do all she can to create a timeline where Radical-6 had never been released.

“You said it was over.” Aoi’s tone takes on a new snip to it, accusatory. “You said this was what we needed to do. We did it. You’re here. You’re safe. This is what we’ve spent the last five years preparing for - we succeeded. What else could you possibly want?”

Akane purses her lips. It’s naive of him, surely, to imagine that this is a result of anything wanted. “It’s like Schrodinger's Cat,” she says. “I was the cat in the box. Now you’ve opened the box. I’m alive. I’m grateful. But now the world outside of the box is in superposition. What do you want me to do? Let it phase out of existence, taking the cat with it?”

Aoi wants to scream. He wants to be the younger brother for once, wants to give in to his childish desire to kick his feet against the wall, yell at Akane for being utterly unfair. Instead he sits on the bed opposite her, takes a deep breath as he processes.

“You saved me,” she whispers. She looks down at her feet, unable to meet his eyes. “I’m never going to be able to repay you for that. I know it’s not fair. I’m sorry. And if you want to live a normal life - it’s okay if you need to go. You’ve done far more than anyone could ever hope for.”

Out of everything that he’s seen in the last 24 hours,

Kubota's remains on the walls, Nijisaki's body splattered in the shower, Musashidou's lifeless eyes, the implication that Akane would ever think that he would leave her to fend for herself is what scars him the most.

"It's called Crash Keys, kid. *Plural.* It wouldn't make sense for it to be just one of us." He buries his face in his hands with a loud groan. "Fuck. *Fuck.* God, we are so fucked up. We're incapable of letting things be easy."

Akane climbs off of the desk. She sits next to her brother and buries her face into his shoulder, breathing in his familiar cologne. "Mama and Papa must be turning over in their graves. So much for us becoming a teacher and a lawyer."

Aoi smiles at the memory of their parents. He kisses the top of Akane's head, wrapping an arm around her. "I don't know. They were ahead of their time. They didn't even bat an eye when I told them I was a boy. They let you wear dresses when you were young. I think they'd have been happy we'd taken a decision and stuck with it." He swallows thickly. "Sometimes, I miss them so badly that I think it'll kill me. But weeks like this one, I'm a little relieved they're not here to worry about us."

Akane nods. She doesn't remember her parents as much as Aoi does, having only been five years old when they had died, but she has vague snippets in her mind, of warmth, of mealtimes, of the way their mother sang when she cooked, of

the way their father would still play with her after a long day of work. Still, she understands - it's painful enough having Aoi worry about her.

"We should take a month off after Roswell," Akane says finally. "Play pretend for a while. Date someone, volunteer somewhere, squabble over dinner. We'll have the rest of our lives to work. We should enjoy ourselves while we can."

Aoi laughs. He looks up at Akane. He's aware his eyes are watery from the onslaught of emotions but he doesn't particularly care. He's just relieved his sister is here with him. "That'd be nice. I'm sure Junpei would be overjoyed if you asked him out on a date."

Akane laughs too at that, tinged with sadness. She shakes her head. "Yeah right. I'm not dragging him into this mess. Let the poor boy rest after what we've put him through."

"That boy is going to chase you to the edge of the earth, whether you ask him to or not," Aoi states matter-of-factly. He grins. "You might be the one with knowledge of a million timelines, but I've got something you don't have: older brother intuition. He's a good kid. You've got *my* approval."

Akane rolls her eyes. "You're ridiculous."

Aoi looks over his shoulder at the alarm clock on the bedside table. "If we head out in the next half hour, we can

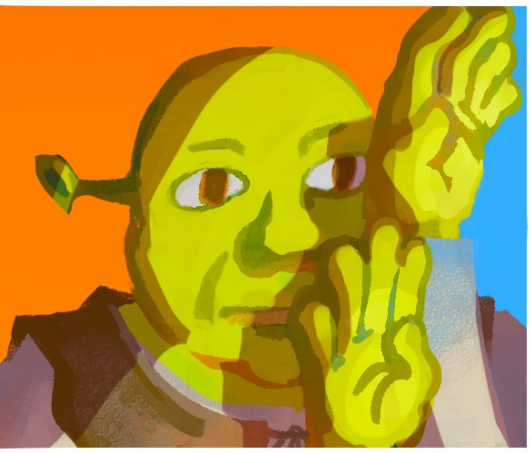
probably make it to Roswell by ten. Go get ready. You're going to hate yourself if we're walking around in the New Mexico sun in the afternoon."

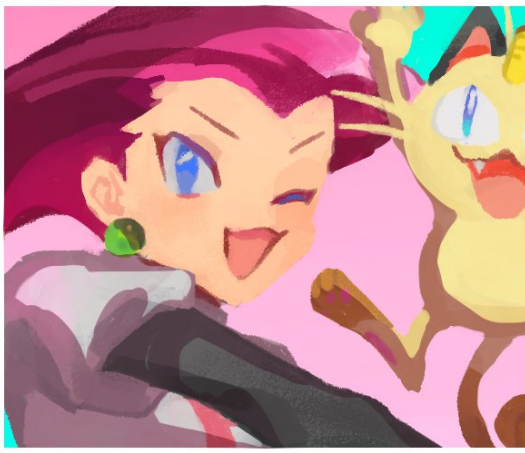
Akane nods. She stands up. "One last trip," she says as she makes her way to the bathroom.

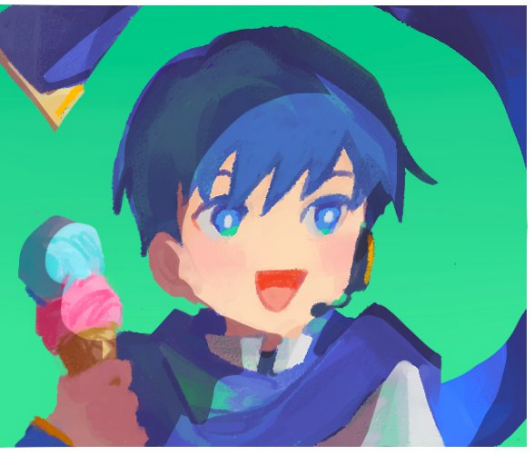
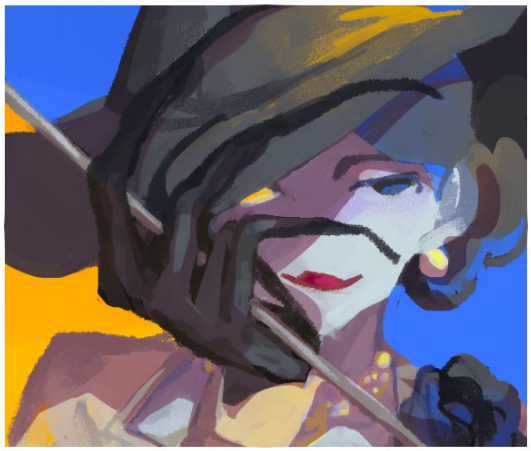
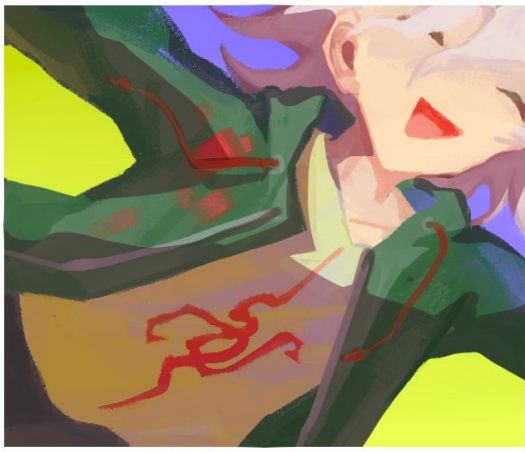
"One last trip," Aoi echoes. It's a hollow promise that they both know they're going to break, but he's relieved to have the lie to look forward to anyways. He's not sure how he's feeling, but the truth is that he is overwhelmingly okay with his fate. He's known all along that it's naive to put the words "normal" and "Kurashiki" in the same sentence. Sure, it might sting a little to be reminded, but adjusting is quick, and he's prepared.

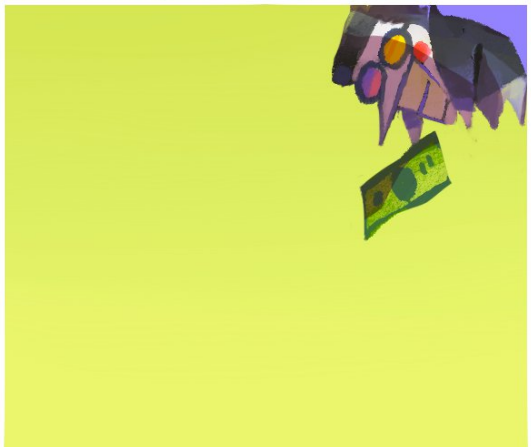
He'd go to the ends of the earth for his sister. He has faith, and he is correct in this faith: Akane would do the same for him. Though Akane hasn't told him this yet, she is going to Roswell for Aoi, because she needs to learn more about the transporters that she's heard rumors of from other timelines, because she needs to repay the favor. She, too, is going to create a timeline where Aoi survives, because they need each other. Because what is Crash Keys without the two of them, plurality, intertwined amongst the timelines? Despite the pain and suffering Aoi knows is sure to come his way, he is grateful. Not many people have the privilege of being related to Akane Kurashiki.

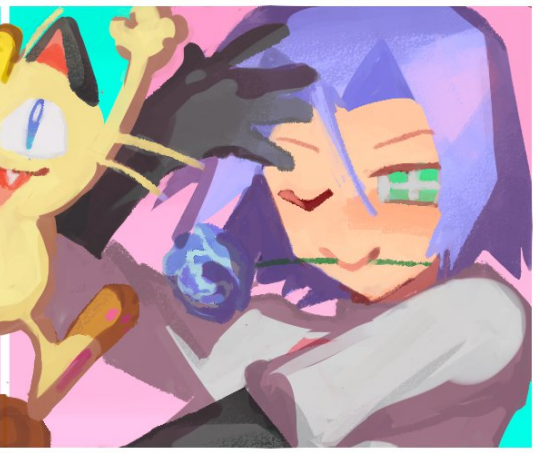
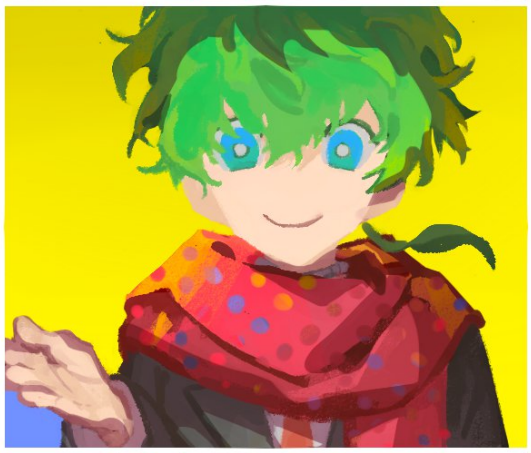
XXX

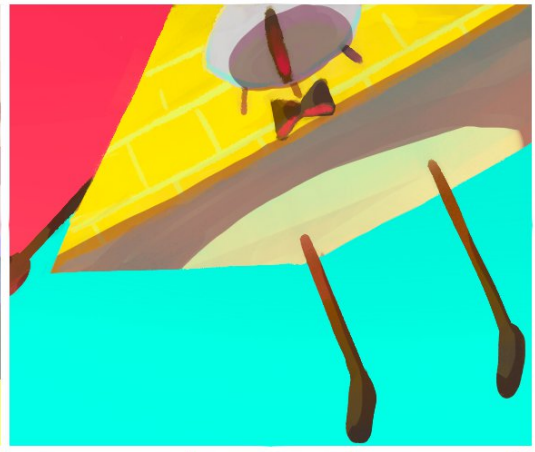
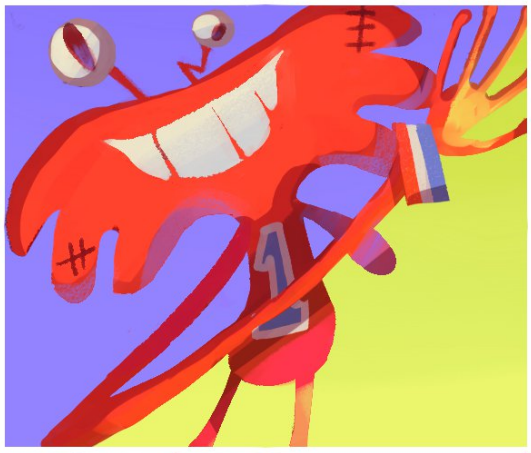


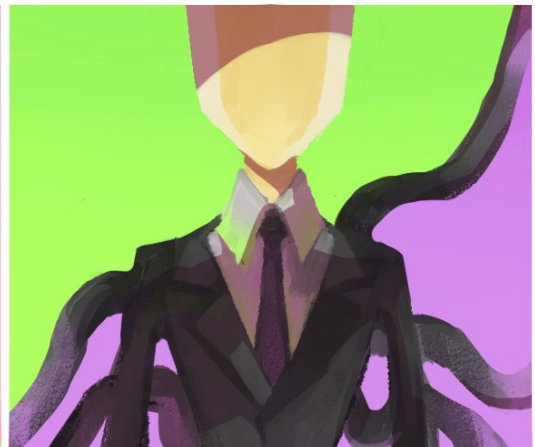


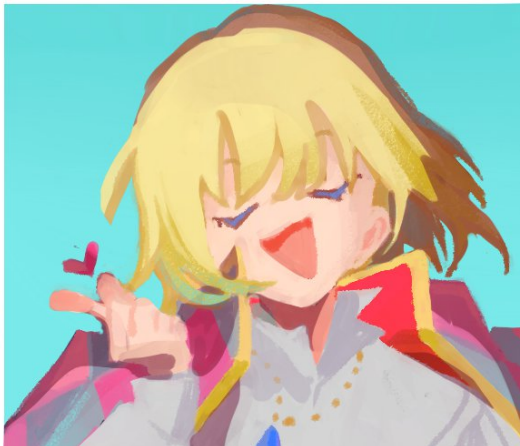




DEATH NOTE






Win Stupid Prizes

#apollo justice
#ace attorney

Written by
experimentaldragonfire

The email seems like junk mail, at first.

Apollo's been clearing out his inbox, cycling his way through the various repetitive tasks he thinks of during a typical day at the Wright Anything Agency. He'd love to be doing more legal things, but opportunities for a still-relatively-inexperienced lawyer are few and far between. At least this is more dignified than the amount of housekeeping and cleaning he's previously been tasked with.

The bold-lettered *Thank You For Your Entry: Sexiest Lawyer Competition* subject line stands out just enough that he's curious, that he lets himself click on the email and skim its contents. As he does, though, details stand out that wouldn't be present in most spam mails.

They have his full name, for one. There's also a receipt for the entry fee–a mere twenty-five dollars, sure, but charged to a card he's unfamiliar with. And the email is miraculously free from spelling errors or dubious links—something that's giving Apollo a strange feeling of apprehension.

He rolls his chair back from his desk and glances across the office, quickly finding a familiar blue top hat meshed amidst a

pile of various magic-show props.

"Trucy?" Apollo calls, trying to keep his voice level. "What do you know about a...."Sexiest Lawyer Competition?""

Trucy Wright pops up from where she'd been disguised by at least three plush rabbits and a stack of white-tipped magic wands. "Polly, I thought you'd never ask!"

So his intuition had been right—Trucy *was* involved with all this.

"Why do I have an email from them thanking me for my registration?"

Trucy tips her head to one side. "Because I registered you for the competition, duh! I think you've got a really good chance of winning."

Apollo pinches the bridge of his nose. "Putting aside how there's even a competition about that, why would you think *I* had any chance of winning such a thing? I'm sure that even amongst lawyers, there's got to be more good-looking guys."

"Aww, c'mon, you're perfectly good-looking! Anyway, the kinds of people who vote in this contest aren't all about *looks*, it's about how good you are at lawyering, too! And you've got an almost-perfect track record!"

Apollo busies himself during their discussion by opening up

the competition's website and scrolling through the publicly-available information about entrants. He's a little shocked (and impressed) at the number of photos Trucy has managed to upload to his "contestant profile." It's all for nothing, though, as he scrolls down farther and—

"Wait, Klavier Gavin's on this list?? I'm up against Prosecutor Gavin?? Trucy, come on, how do you think I'm supposed to win this again?"

Trucy appears in front of his desk, leaning over and letting her left foot leave the ground as she reads off of his screen from the wrong side. "Ooo, Polly, do you think he's sexy??"

Apollo splutters. "I–*no*, I just—Trucy, you know he was a rockstar! His fans will just vote for him!"

"Not necessarily. You remember how his rock career ended, right?"

Unfortunately, Apollo was there for the moment everything came crashing down around Klavier Gavin's head. Twice, actually. He doesn't need the reminder.

"I still think he's going to have much more of a chance than me. Where did you even get the money to enter, anyway? It's a waste of twenty-five dollars that could have gone towards... office supplies, or something."

Trucy smiles innocently. "Oh, I just borrowed Daddy's card! He won't mind, not really."

Apollo has his doubts.

"Well, I'm glad you're having fun. There's no way I'm even going to place, though, so you'd probably have been better off with the office supplies."

—

Congratulations–you've won! Sexiest Lawyer Competition

Dear Mr Justice,

It is my great pleasure to inform you that you have won first prize in the annual Sexiest Lawyer competition, an event held to benefit legal charities nationwide. In order to recognize you as the victor, we need you to click the link below and fill out the accompanying form. Following this, we will contact you with further steps to claim your winnings.

Congratulations!

Orr Ganyser (CEO, Sexiest Whatever Inc)

Apollo blinks, reloads the page three times, and pinches his arm *hard* to make sure he's actually awake. It's been three weeks since he'd given the whole thing up as a bad job, and somehow…he's won the stupid sexy lawyer contest??

He clicks the link in the email, pushing away the cool tones of Mr Kristoph Gavin in his brain warning him against phishing scams. What's the worst that could happen, somebody gets ahold of Mr Wright's browsing history? He wouldn't wish that on anybody, actually.

The form seems straightforward and professional, and he fills it out before he looks around the office for the initial perpetrator of the whole thing. When Apollo finally spots Trucy, he's unsurprised to find her dangling backwards off of the couch, a spread of tarot cards fanned out in front of her face as though she's trying to make a winning poker hand with them.

"Did you know I would win that contest?" he asks, instead of anything about what she's doing. Trucy lowers the cards and blinks up at him.

"Of course, Polly. Like I said–it's not about looks! It's about law!"

"Ouch. It could be a little bit about looks."

Trucy bites her lip and squints at him. "Nah. Mostly about lawyering."

"Hey!"

Despite everything, Apollo feels a warm ball of triumph in his chest. He's had a tough few months– tough *year*, probably– and at least somebody's recognized his skill. Maybe he'll even

win something useful, like enough money to cover next month's rent, or a new set of legal reference books for the office! (He's grateful for the *presence* of legal reference books currently, it just might be nice to have some around that aren't ten years old).

He's still thinking up possibilities as to what he might do with the winnings when the telltale *ding* from their ancient desktop computer informs him that he's got mail. The person running this thing must either be really attentive to their messages, or they were waiting specifically for his response, Apollo guesses, because the email he's just received details an address and a time for him to "collect his prize" tomorrow, still with no mention of what he's won.

"We can get there then, no problem! Tell them you'll be there," Trucy says in his ear, where she's been peering over his shoulder at the monitor.

"I just wish they'd tell me *what I'm getting*," Apollo grumbles, typing out his reply.

"That's half the fun, though!"

"I'm starting to think we have different definitions of 'fun.'"

—

The building whose address matches that from the email is a nondescript grey rectangle, offering no hints as to what's

waiting for Apollo and Trucy within. Apollo checks his printed-out copy of the victory email three times, just to be sure, before he steps up to the door and tries the handle. It opens without resistance, and they make their way inside.

Click! **A bright flash of light momentarily blinds Apollo, and he blinks away white spots from his eyes frantically. It takes a few moments before he's regained enough sight to focus on the source of the light—a man in a suit covered entirely in sequins, holding a camera and beaming brightly.**

"Wha..." is all Apollo can manage, stunned by the abruptness of it all.

The man puts his camera aside and holds out his hand. "Welcome, Mr Justice! And congratulations on your highly-desirable status as this year's official Sexiest Lawyer!"

Apollo gathers his thoughts and meets the man (Mr Ganyser, presumably) in a firm handshake. He looks around the space, which consists mainly of standard cinderblock walls and a handful of draped backdrops.

"Thank you very much, it's...an honor, truly. Sorry to ask, but what am I doing here, again?"

Trucy pipes up from behind him: "Sorry, Mr Ganyser! I didn't tell him what the prize was! I thought it would be better as a surprise." She's grinning, which immediately spikes Apollo's blood pressure.

Mr Ganyser chuckles good-naturedly. “Oh, not a problem at all! Apollo—you don’t mind if I call you Apollo, do you?—here’s your trophy, personalized of course, and we’re going to spend the rest of the day on a professional photoshoot for the year’s Sexy Lawyer Calendar!”

Apollo blinks, hoping that he’s heard incorrectly. Or that he’s heard correctly, but that it’s all been a dream, or some kind of hallucination. But the room stays real, stubbornly refusing to dissolve into mist or nothingness, and the backdrops and racks of costumes and props solidify into a comprehensible theming.

“A…calendar?”

“Yep! The best calendar of the year. It’s sold in shops nationwide, all for charity, of course. Come on, time’s a-wasting!”

And before having any more time to dwell on the subject, Apollo’s ushered along towards the first set, Trucy’s giant grin at the edge of his vision in a scene that’ll haunt him for the next year.

He manages to block out most of it in the way that his worst trials go—rote memorization, a slight dissociation between his body and his mind. Apollo had been hoping for some monetary prize, or something tangible he could swap out for the funds to improve his legal resources or his living

space or even, hell, a paid vacation somewhere he didn't have to think about niche legal code or evidence law. Instead, he's shuffled between dusty backdrops and handed Halloween-costume tier outfits while being instructed on the ideal pose to embody the "vibe" of the month.

Well*, he thinks, teeth bared in a facsimile of a smile, *at least it's all for charity.

—

The months pass, after that. Apollo had received his complimentary copy of the calendar and refused to open it, shoving it somewhere under his bed alongside the mountains of old law school assignments and cardboard packaging from his furniture that he swears might come in handy one day. But that's not to say he hasn't seen it—he's forced to contend with his poor life choices (trusting Trucy Wright) every day at the office, where the Sexiest Lawyer Calendar has become a staple of the décor.

Coincidentally, Apollo has been spending a lot more time doing research and paperwork in the publicly-available spaces in the courthouse since the start of the year.

But things are finally settling down, returning to normal after the excitement of the competition and Apollo's undignified prize. Soon, he thinks, he might be able to remove the dreaded calendar from the Wright Agency without

provoking a full-on investigation as to its whereabouts. He'll have to replace it with something, though—perhaps he should make a detour on his way back after this final errand?

It's almost a normal trial that he's working through, for once—a standard crime, a clear-cut alibi, everything above-board. Unfortunately, Apollo's worked enough "normal" trials to know that those are the most dangerous, the ones where everything's prone to go wrong with a single piece of evidence. So he's taking precautions, this time—consulting with the prosecution *prior* to them both having their assumptions flipped on their heads in the middle of a courtroom.

He's familiar enough with the route up to Klavier Gavin's office by now—they're still frequent courtroom rivals, despite the new additions to the docket of both defense attorneys and prosecutors. It reassures Apollo, somewhat, to know that the person on the other side of the court is someone he can trust to work with him to find the truth behind a case, no matter if that benefits him or his opponent. Still, it's been a little while since they'd faced off against each other, and even if he might want to contact the prosecutor outside of work, Apollo hasn't had a reason to stop into Klavier's office for a few months now.

He steps up to the door, paperwork clasped in his hand, and knocks on the polished mahogany right under the shiny brass nameplate. Internally, Apollo critiques how much money the Prosecutors' Office must spend on office embellishments—they could buy *so many* legal texts with those kinds of funds!

The door swings open, and Apollo finds himself greeted with the expected blond prosecutor beyond it. However, his gaze catches on another face over Prosecutor Gavin's shoulder—this one uncannily familiar, and printed out in 8x15 glossy paper hung on the wall. The legal paperwork he'd been holding slips in his grasp and flutters to the floor like confetti as Apollo gapes in horror.

Of course, nothing goes unnoticed by Klavier Gavin.

"Oh, *Herr* Forehead! Admiring my new calendar? I must say, they did a *fantastisch* job with the costumes—you look even better in that than I would have done!"

The *Sexiest Lawyer* calendar taunts him, making Apollo contemplate his own image. He tries to tear his eyes away, but lands on the clear indications of use, of trial dates and planned days off scribbled onto the gridded surface. Klavier didn't just put this up as a joke—he's been *using* it as intended.

The picture at the top of the page depicts a winter scene, false snowflake backdrop and hot chocolate clip-art and all. Apollo contemplates the skimpy semblance of a snowman outfit his past self had been photographed in and contemplates the multiple-year prison sentence that an arson charge carries. Then, he manages to clear his throat, look away, and face Prosecutor Gavin with what he hopes is a neutral expression.

“Oh, that calendar? I’m just glad that any profit went to a good cause. It really wasn’t a big deal or anything, I’d almost forgotten about the entire competition.”

If his golden bangle could detect him lying to himself, it would be cutting off his circulation by now.

Klavier blinks and glances back at the calendar, as if to double-check that he’s not wrong about the absurdity of the photos contained within it. Then he looks back at Apollo, makes an entirely indescribable facial expression, and bursts out laughing.

“Good one, *Herr* Forehead,” he manages between gasps for air. “I won’t mention it again, *ja*? Let’s put this whole thing behind us, for your sake.”

Apollo squashes the mild indignation in his chest that had risen at the thought of being laughed at, and finds himself unable to resist grinning along. After all—it was probably a nice change for Klavier to not have to be the subject of something like this for once.

In the end, Apollo thinks, watching Klavier Gavin laugh harder than he’s seen since the trial that redefined both of their perspectives, maybe going along with Trucy’s ideas had unexpected positive outcomes.

My littermates said I was too small... Too weak. But I've proven them wrong.
I've learned how to be strong... How to live for BLOOD. Because that's the key. The only answer.
I am leader of Bloodclan. I am SCOURGE.
AND I HAVE WON!

@MARLOWEMEMO

ALLIANCE

#popee the performer #papi #kedamono #cartoon violence

Written by
Paul

Kedamono howled with laughter from his lounge chair, slapping his furry thigh in hysteria. As every day went at the circus, he was watching his favorite TV show, the UFO Girls. For a wolf, Kedamono didn't need much to keep himself happy: a box of chicken drumsticks, his masks with varying expressions drying in the sun, and his TV. And, turned out his co-star didn't either! A tall, yellow-clad man named Papi always accompanied him on lazy days, watching episode after episode and nodding in delight to each joke. In all honesty, that was all Kedamono needed in the world, and nothing had to—

A (sadly) familiar red-and-white striped clown jutted his arm into Kedamono's face. Startled, Kedamono focused his vision, meeting eyes with the well-known Popee. Young, blonde, and positively beaming in his bunny outfit, he held an open magazine out. *"HOW TO MAKE ANYTHING APPEAR FROM THIN AIR! WATCH NOW ON OUR TV STATION!"* was in bold letters, accompanied by drawings of the said magic trick: a man pulling from his pocket a bouquet, a long stick, and a frog.

Popee pulled the magazine back, ecstatic with a smile his

assistant's seen too many times before. *He wanted to change the channel from the UFO Girls??* Kedamono furiously shook his head, frown screwed on his current mask. The clown shook his head back, and unable to use words to express his anger, he opted for pointing at the pages again. Papi joined Kedamono's disinterest, grabbing the remote and clicking the volume a couple of notches higher. Distracted, Kedamono caught a particularly funny joke on-screen and howled again. Popee's glee evaporated, slamming the magazine down and shaking with fury. Popee marched to the TV and lept on top, grabbing a hold of the antennas and manually cranking them to his desired channel. The UFO Girls dissolved into radio static. Kemanono's mask fell to reveal one of shock, then anger as he sprung from his chair. He yanked the antennas back, briefly hearing the missed

of the UFO Girls, but Popee only yanked them back. A childish tug-of-war ensued, shrowed in furious squeals and barks, as Papi lounged on the side. He ratcheted the volume higher and *higher*, trying to drown out the chaos atop their screen. They tugged and tugged *and tugged until—*

Everyone froze. Heads turned towards the continued, futuristic hum, focused in the center of their open circus. To their surprise, a noise was emanating from... an oval-shaped... portal? The size of a full-length mirror (tacky green and glowing with hazy particles), the portal crackled ominously.

The performers quickly forgot their tussle and cautiously walked to the portal. Then, a hummed from the portal, letting everyone back up to witness... *something.*

Before their eyes (and Kedamono's porcelain mask), a long leg stepped out, dressed in short boots and grey pants. A completely new green-clad man waltzed into their circus, adjusting his sunglasses and top hat. He was *incredibly* slender, mimicking the thin trees that scattered around their circus. Yet, the most *perplexing* thing about the man was... *his presentation.* It was hard to form into words, but when Kedamono and his companions resembled smooth, imperfect figures, the green man resembled... *polish.*

. Another figure stepped out of the portal, much more jarring in appearance. Dressed in a grey suit and pink tie was a blonde man, shockingly plain in features. He was staring at a device in his hand, struck at an angle as he pressed on it several times (Kedamono had a *guess*—a *flip-phone?*). The most distracting part of him was the fact he was *flat.* Occupying their 3D world was a moving cardboard cutout, fluidly walking as if he were completely normal in his new world.

. He wasn't the last of them, not by a *long* shot.

Within the next several seconds, the portal spewed out *several* characters, quickly filling up the space around them.

There were more men with similar polish to the green man, more 2D characters, and even some with a *disturbing* amount of detail. Characters of *every possible* shape and size had now filed in.

And, as quickly as they came out— **The portal closed.**

Before Kedamono could render anything more, the green man locked eyes with the wolf's mask and beamed. He parted his way through the new crowd, and as if his bewilderment couldn't grow anymore, the man… *formed words.*

"There you are! We've been looking for you!"

…How did he make those noises.

The man took Kedamono's paw and shook it. *How did he do that with his mouth. AND WHY COULD HE UNDERSTAND IT!?!*

"I'm sure you're confused, and we apologize. It's never pretty when we arrive in a new universe."

Kedamono's bewildered mask changed to a spiral as he swayed in place.

The man adjusted his suit and stepped back, addressing the three performers. "Hello! I'm glad to meet you all. We've been trying to reach you for a *long* time now, but you've finally opened your universe to us. For that, we thank you."

Kedamono shook some confusion from his brain. *Opened... our universe?* He tilted his head.

"...Oh, were you... not ready to meet us?"

Popee chirped, pointing behind him to the TV, now abandoned. Its antennas were bent at jarring angles, sparking as the screen still spat static.

"Aah, you *did* mean to contact us! TV signals are the *sign* of the Sexy-Alliance."

...Huh.

Several seconds of bewildered silence passed before the phone-wielding man spoke. "The Sexyman Alliance? Where all Sexymen of the multiverse unite to create one ultimate Sexy-Army?"

"Kinda like Miguel O'Hara's multiverse team with all the Spider-Men," A flat, pixelated skeleton chimed in (though, his mouth did not move—he made repeated monotone noises as a hovering textbox displayed his words). He shrugged, winking. "I suppose he's *too tied up* in his work."

A 2D floating triangle with aposable limbs and a top hat groaned (again, with no mouth—there was a horrible trend starting to form). "UUUGH, Sans, your puns never get better."

"Yet you always listen to them."

“Not that we want to!!”

“Enough, you too!” The green man silenced the others. He sighed and returned to the performers. “I’m sorry for those two, they never stop fighting. As a part of the Sexy-Alliance, we get all sorts of oddballs.”

The three performers stood in complete disbelief.

“Now, we’re sorry for scaring you like this,” he continued, “but we’ve come here for very important business. We are trying to recruit as many sexy-people as we can to formulate a sexy-reign over the non-sexy-world. This takes a lot of people and are trying to find everyone we can, and that includes you!”

The only thing the performers could continue to do was stare. Kedamono’s head spun, filled with so many words he couldn’t register. *Alliance, Miguel O’Hara, Sans, Sexy.* The human performers were just as clueless.

“Here, let me officially invite you.” The man cleared his throat. “I, the Once-ler, would like to invite Kedamono and Papi from this world to our Sexy-Alliance in our quest to sexy-ify the whole multiverse. Please, accept our request and help us make the universe a sexier-place.”

Though the new words rattled in his head, Kedamono perked his ears to his name. *Invite? Only him and Papi?* He tilted his head again, pointing to himself.

"Yes, you! You two have expressed remarkable qualities of a sexyman and we're delighted to have you join us."

"Here, we have somethin' that may convince ya'." The triangle reached behind him (well, more *into* him? Him occupying 2D space didn't help their brains) and pulled out a treat. Not just *any* treat. *A mouth-watering drumstick.*

Immediately, Kedamono washed with compliance, revealing a mask of sheer joy and drool. His tail wagged and he reached a paw out hungrily. The triangle waved it back and forth, thinning his one singular eye. "*Thaaat's right, you both want to join the Sexy-Alliance sooooo bad..." Oooh... Kedamono wanted that drumstick sooo bad....*

Behind him, the two other clowns stepped forward, Popee especially excited to join the crew. But, a hand quickly jutted out to stop him. "Not you." A new character said, 3D and much more polished than the rest. He was blonde and burly, sporting an emo haircut and an arsenal of weapons across his belt. "We're only recruiting the dog and your mentor."

Popee's face curled with disgust, jabbing a hand out to his currently-recruiting assistants. The man shook his head. "You haven't met the requirements yet. We're strict about rules."

A new 2D boy showed up. He was young, very pale, and had matted, curled hair that stuck out at every angle. He faded into a new "picture", looking at his hand and spoke. "One of

our prime rules, which we can't break, is that every sexyman needs to be 18 or older. We know it's despairing, but rules are rules."

"But Nagito, aren't you a teenager yourself?" A large, colorful, robot bear asked behind him.

"Ah, but there are loopholes." He faded into clutching his arms, expression crazed. "Where I come from, I *look* like a teenager, but I've actua—"

"No spoilers, Non-Binary Einstein." Sans interrupted.

"What they're *trying* to say," Once-ler reeled the conversation back to him, "is that you are still 17. And, unfortunately, you'll *stay* 17. So, we can't recruit you. But, we can still recruit your companions."

The clown's face stilled from shock, then warped into *pure* rage, growing red alarmingly fast. Steam billowed from his ears, stamping his feet, and shook with hatred. Popee stormed off, dashing behind a tent as steam followed.

"Where's the kid going?" The blonde asked.

"Ah, I wouldn't worry about it," The triangle snarked, floating towards a now summoning portal and leading the still very much entranced Kedamono. "We've got who we want now. Let's leave the—"

The drumstick unceremoniously dropped to the ground as its holder *flung* from view, crashing into the collection of characters behind him. Ding! A chime rung from the collapsed triangle corpse which signified his untimely death. Completely apathetic to the death in front of him, Kedamono snatched the drumstick and gnawed in delight. Everyone else, on the other hand, stared at Popee as he now branded a comically large shotgun, smoking from its previous blast. A couple of men shrieked, others grabbing for their weapons and aiming at the young clown. It took no more convincing for Popee to cock the gun again, blasting off another nearby character's head. Ding!

Within seconds, the air of the circus erupted into *warfare*. Bullets and daggers flew past each other while Popee unloaded countless shells into cartoon bodies. Only when a stray bullet clipped Kedamono's ear did he look up from his meal to see that now several sexy-people had fallen, injured, and been defeated. Kedamono wore a horrified mask, jumped to his bipedal paws, and ran away with his tail between his legs. He stood back at a safe distance, chattering his fangs together as the fight continued with no signs of stopping. Ding! Ding!

Kedamono cupped his ears, screwing his eyes shut. Popee often lost his temper and unleashed it on his assistants, but

never on guests!! Every second Kedamono didn't do something, more

s and

s assaulted the air. If only Kedamono could help... He could grab a weapon to fight his erratic friend and stop him from hurting anyone else. But where could he get one? It's not like he could grab something out of thin—

A lightbulb popped above Kedamono's head. *THE TV!!* He scrambled towards his TV set, leaving the lightbulb to clatter to the ground behind him. It was still on from the earlier dispute, but spitting sparks from their tussle. Kedamono flipped through the abandoned magazine and found the station he needed. Knowing the remote was useless, he frantically yanked the antennas around until the screen clicked to what he needed. The advertised man wasted no time in explaining his trick once focused (even if the chaos behind Kedamono was making it difficult to understand him). A focused stare... a flick of your wrist... and a bouquet! *Perfect!!*

Kedamono returned focus to the war behind him. *All he had to do was summon something to stop Popee... A fishing net launcher!* His mask turned into one of focus, concentrating on his paw... when

He pulled out his arm, grabbing hold of the trigger when—*a bouquet??* No, he wanted a *launcher!!* Concentrate...

, a long stick! *No!!* Concentrate,

, a small frog! *NO!!!*

Kedamono stamped his feet, flicking his wrist over and over only to collect more and more junk while the chaos

only... stopped? The silence brought Kedamono out of his fit, looking up. Everyone had frozen, including the opposing team, and was staring at Kedamono. A startled blush crept on his face, nervously shuffling as they continued to stare... *behind* him? Kedamono gasped and whipped his head back to the TV. The man on screen only continued, repeating the concentration, the

s, and new weapons!

He turned back, seeing the renewed chaos heightened into *absolute mayhem*. Popee had abandoned the shotgun in favor of a new minigun, tearing through the now newly equipped Sexy-Alliance. Most sexymen now brandished nonsensical objects as weapons: chairs flew through the air, a horse galloped past some fighters, a train whizzed past as the scene only escalated further and further into complete disrepair.

Though completely shredded apart, Kedamono pulled himself together. *He still had time to fix this.* With a concentrate,

, and a now unwanted street lamp, Kedamono wielded his weapon and a stoic mask as he *charged* into the fight. His sights were on Popee, still wailing on the trigger of his minigun with maniacal laughter. Closer, *closer*, Kedamono screwed his eyes shut and *slammed* his weapon out.

Joy lit his face, looking up to see his target. ... One of the first suited 2D men was lying on the ground, splattered with blood.

Horror washed over Kedamono, mask turning purple. The chaos simmered down, the Alliance staring at their fallen

soldier. A distant voice cried, heartbroken, “REIGEN!!”

Even Popee stopped momentarily, watching as the Once-ler cradled the flat Reigen, shaking with anger. He snapped, “That’s ENOUGH! We’re leaving you and your *stupid* world! You aren’t *fit* for the Alliance yet.”

The Once-ler whipped behind him, “SEXYMEN! RETREAT!”

The swarm of men all nodded, most dropping their weapons and fleeing towards a hasty portal. In particular, Sans managed to grab a familiar object, *an abandoned drumstick* and disappeared. Kedamono’s mask wobbled with despair, reaching for his missing prize. Popee, on the other hand, only grew *more* furious. The minigun dropped, grabbing a spare dagger on the ground and charging. Most men had already fled with their fallen soldiers and only left a quickly closing portal. As a last resort, Popee *chucked* his weapon, slipping past the pixel portal by a hair.

...Ding!

Delighted, Popee laughed in squeaks, pumping his fists in victory. He cemented his *last* say in his victorious fight against the *dreaded, horrible Sexy-Alliance*, and he was *rid* of the laughing stock of—

VROOOOOM... A small portal reopened, just enough for the dagger to flick back.

Ding!

Mid-cackle, the dagger struck Popee square in the forehead. A silent moment passed before Popee crashed to the floor, blood pooling underneath him in a perfect circle.

Kedamono closed his eyes, a tear painted on his mask with his head to the floor. The sexy-drumstick's scent was no more, leaving him hungry and alone as Popee's body only grew colder. Papi, close behind, closed his hands and dipped in prayer, completely unbothered by the whole ordeal he managed to avoid.

And the screen faded to black.

applesteinie

EXIT
WORLD'S OKAYEST INTERVIEWER
SMILE YOU'RE ON CAMERA
PLEASE WAIT HERE
LOUD NOISES
HANG IN THERE
WARNING
DANGER
MOVING SAWS
AVOID SHARP OBJECTS

Viral Sensation

#a goofy movie #bradley uppercrust III #max goof

Written by
Taruchinator

Bradley Uppercrust III wasn't one to shy away from the spotlight.

This wasn't some *grand revelation* or anything of the sort, just a simple fact. His family name carried the weight of prestige and expectations, which in turn meant he was always under scrutinizing observation from the masses.

Yet none of it bothered him because, really, why would it? As the leader of the elite Gamma Mu Mu fraternity and X-Games champion, there wasn't anything he couldn't do—add his charming good looks and not-too-shabby grades and Bradley considered himself to be the best in all categories.

Until one fateful day, everything he ever knew crumbled around him thanks to one annoying little freshman: Max Goof.

Losing the respect of his fraternity brothers along with the title of Champion was more than enough for Bradley to hit rock bottom, and now the kind of attention he'd receive on campus was... *dismissive*, at best. To say the way he viewed the attention from others had changed would be an understatement.

Still, none of that compared to what he was witnessing at this very moment.

The brunet stared at his phone where a video Max had sent him was playing. It was a silly little practice vlog for the X-Games that he'd filmed with the help of his friend Bobby and posted on social media.

At first, he had no idea why this video concerned him, let alone why Max had sent it to him in the first place, until he saw what was shown at the end.

Bradley appeared in the background, trying out some safety equipment that was lying around the skatepark since he was in the mood of getting some practice himself, even if it wasn't for the games. The camera cut before he could even notice he was being filmed.

A simple caption was sent alongside the video link: "*look at the comments ;)*"

And so he did. And they were... *odd.*

sk8terboy12: **is that bradley uppercrust? why's he in this? :/**

furryz4lifez: **STOP WHY IS THIS GUY SO HOT I CAN'T?!**

beaglebeau: **I can take him. not in a fight.**

roxiewolf25: **I'm guessing the rumors of him and Max Goof going out**

are true? :)

brad3rdfan: **idk but is it weird he looks kinda sexy trying out that stuff?**

gammas.official: **and THAT, ladies and gentlemen, is the definition of a twink ;)**

The last comment had the brunet going red in the face in an instant, causing him to almost drop his phone, but instead swiftly catching it and placing it face-down on his dorm room desk. He began rubbing at his temples in hopes of stopping the ensuing headache coming his way.

Bradley had been complimented on his looks in the past, and he'd usually take these comments in stride.

But what these people were saying in this video—a video in which he couldn't have been on screen for longer than five seconds—just had him scratching his head in confusion and at a total loss for words.

"Knock knock! I'd say I respect your privacy and *actually* knock, but we both know that'd be a lie."

"*Great...*" The one person he *really* didn't want to see right now, especially in his disheveled state. Still, he couldn't deny that the soft fabric of the other boy's shirt along with the scent of his cologne was soothing to him. Bradley leaned into the touch with a pout on his lips. "You got a lot of nerve trying

to come here and act like nothing's wrong, freshman.”

Max could be heard tossing his backpack to the usual corner when visiting Bradley at his dorm. A chuckle escaped him as he began running his fingers through the messy brown hair in front of him. “So, first of all, need I remind you that I'm not a freshman anymore? Second, I don't see a problem with people noticing how hot my boyfriend is.”

Another blush spread across his cheeks, and all the brunet could do was hide his face in the other's chest.

It turned out that rivalry was a good excuse for Brad to get closer to Max, all under the guise of trying to find weaknesses to exploit during their first games. Not that the older of the two knew that at the time. But the more he learned, the more his feelings began to morph into something different.

Max Goof was incredibly talented on a skateboard—it was one of the reasons Bradley wanted to recruit him for the Gammas in the first place. Sometimes, the raven would be in the mood to teach him a few moves he never considered before, much to his dismay.

Max Goof wasn't afraid of saying whatever was on his mind—standing up for what he believed was right, as well as for his friends, was a quality Brad secretly admired since he could never get to do that while being part of the Uppercrust family.

Max Goof, just like his surname implied, was a total geek in every sense of the word—he was *obsessed* with Powerline and other classic rock that Bradley had never even *heard* of before. And if he paid a little too much attention to how pretty Max's smile was whenever he rambled about his favorite comic books, well, Brad kept that to himself.

And most importantly of all, Max Goof was the kindest soul to ever grace the earth—he learned this the moment Max called off their bet when he became Champion of the X-Games, claiming that he wanted nothing more than for them to still be friends, even going as far as forgiving him for trying to sabotage the scores.

Which was why it was so surprising to Bradley that not even three months later, Max sheepishly asked if he'd like to go on a date. And even more surprising, Bradley had agreed.

And everything after that was history.

“I brought you lunch if that'll make you feel better.” Max's voice brought the brunet back to the present, where he was still huddled in the safety net that was his boyfriend’s signature red shirt.

As he turned his gaze upwards, Bradley was met with a takeout bag from his favorite sandwich place, with Max smirking as he raised a questioning eyebrow. The brunet didn't even give him the chance to voice another remark

before snatching the bag from his boyfriend's grasp and turning back to his desk with a mumble. "Thanks..."

"Would you look at that," Max took the chance of being freed from the older boy to grab a nearby chair and sit next to him, elbow resting next to a pile of books Bradley had to study for a test in the upcoming week. "Bradley Uppercrust III expressing *gratitude?* To what do I owe the pleasure of such kind words?"

Bradley merely huffed and decided he wasn't in the mood of bickering about the topic. All he wanted at the moment was to eat a tasty sandwich, maybe snuggle with the younger boy for a movie on the couch, and simply forget about this whole ordeal for a while.

Max must have noticed the shift in the brunet's attitude, since he dropped the smirk and furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. "What's up? Did people start saying mean stuff in the comments or something?"

At that, Bradley couldn't stop the chuckle from escaping his lips—to think his boyfriend was worried whether he was getting *cyberbullied* of all things was both ridiculous, yet incredibly endearing.

After unwrapping his tuna sandwich, he merely rolled his eyes before taking a bite. "No, you dingus. It's the total opposite, just like you said it'd be."

Upon hearing that statement, Max visibly seemed to relax, but only for a moment as the gears in his head began to turn, confusion returning tenfold as he eyed Bradley cautiously. "Wait, then... *what's* the problem, again? I thought you liked getting complimented like that."

"None I've gotten over the years are anything like *this.*" He emphasized the point by grabbing his phone and opening the video to shove into Max's face. The younger of the two fumbled for a second, but was quick to get a good grip and stare at the screen. "Besides, they're focusing on *me* when the whole thing is about *you*."

That was partially true.

The fact that out of all the comments only about 30% were talking about Max's skating routine—which was absolutely *flawless*, might he add—irked Bradley the wrong way. He always believed in giving credit where credit was due, so seeing his boyfriend being overlooked simply because of him showing up at the last second was rather jarring.

Another arguably large factor was that the so-called 'compliments' he was receiving in the video were unlike anything he'd ever heard before.

Were they being sarcastic? They *had* to be! He was *literally* only picking up a helmet and knee pads, which as far as he was concerned, shouldn't be considered 'hot' or 'sexy'.

Yet it would seem the viewers thought otherwise.

Breaking him out of his thoughts once more was Max, who'd sneakily found a way to wrap his arms around Bradley's shoulders in an awkward attempt at a hug. The raven let a smile grace his lips as he stared down at the brunet. "As touching as that is, like I said, it's kinda nice being able to brag about my boyfriend like this. Unlike *you*, Mister Uppercrust, *I* don't mind sharing the spotlight."

An annoying sense of warmth that Bradley now recognized as his affection for Max bloomed in his chest at the statement. He turned to look at the other boy straight in the eye to try and look like it didn't affect him. The heat in his cheeks, however, begged to differ. "So basically you're saying my feelings don't count?"

"Exactly," Max replied in a beat without an ounce of hesitation. But not without nuzzling against the brunet's neck in a way the skater boy rarely did unless he was touch starved, or in this case, knew Bradley needed a pick-me-up. "But if it really bothers you, I can always take it down and re-upload. Bobby edits you out and problem solved!"

The ticklish feeling of his boyfriend's fur against his own was something the brunet wasn't immune to, so a few stifled chuckles made their way through despite doing his best to keep them in. It was truly fascinating to him how Max had only known him for about a year or so, yet it seemed like he'd

known him his whole life with how he got him to open up—even more so than his former closest friends.

His family, the fraternity, and even classmates at school had shaped him into being what was expected of an Uppercrust.

Expectations were resting upon his shoulders from the moment he was born, and everyone was always keen on reminding him.

Everyone but Max.

Which was why Bradley would never ask him to delete something that, to some extent, still brought him some kind of publicity. With the X-Games fast approaching, a little bit of that wouldn't hurt to have.

“Nah,” the brunet finally found his voice again as he reached to run his fingers through the messy locks of black hair resting on his shoulder, “it's already got so many views. Even if you deleted it now, it wouldn't make a difference.”

“Ya sure?” Max mumbled against the fabric of his sweater. “I mean, it's kinda my fault this all happened in the first place. Feels like I should be making up for it somehow...”

“Max Goof feeling *remorse*? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh shut it, you know what I mean!”

“You wanna help me?” Bradley finally pushed the body on top of him away, only seeing the younger boy's pout for a second before tossing him the TV remote. He pointed towards his DVD player. “Pick the trashiest movie out of my stash and bring out the blankets from the closet. I'm ordering pizza.”

Max stared at him with wide eyes for a moment, only for a grin to form which showcased the gap in his teeth. It didn't take him long to rise from his seat and head towards the cabinet. “Your wish is my command, your Highness. Don't forget to double cheese it, though—and no olives!”

“On it.” Bradley rolled his eyes while reaching for his phone and watching the enthusiastic boy in his tiny dorm room, practically bouncing up and down at the thought of the two staying in together. Not like the brunet wasn't feeling the same.

Before dialing the local pizzeria, Bradley opened up the video's comment section once more, this time aimlessly scrolling and even laughing at some of the absurd stuff being shared. He couldn't even fathom why this was bothering him so much in the first place.

“*Guess the ‘Uppercrust legacy’ is still stuck in my head...*” The boy let out a humorless chuckle at the thought.

So what if he made a fool of himself? As far as he was concerned, he was far beyond the point of scrambling to make an impression on others.

He'd certainly already done that without even trying.

On that note...

“Max?”

“Yeah?”

“What does ‘*twink*’ mean?”

“... I need you to sit down for this one, Brad.”

#1
BABE

SEXY!!
MIRU667

Digital Merch

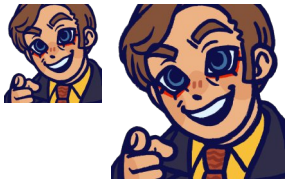
Texting Stickers *by Uukipi*

Shimeji (Desktop pet) *by Tonestar*

Instructions are included in its ZIP archive!

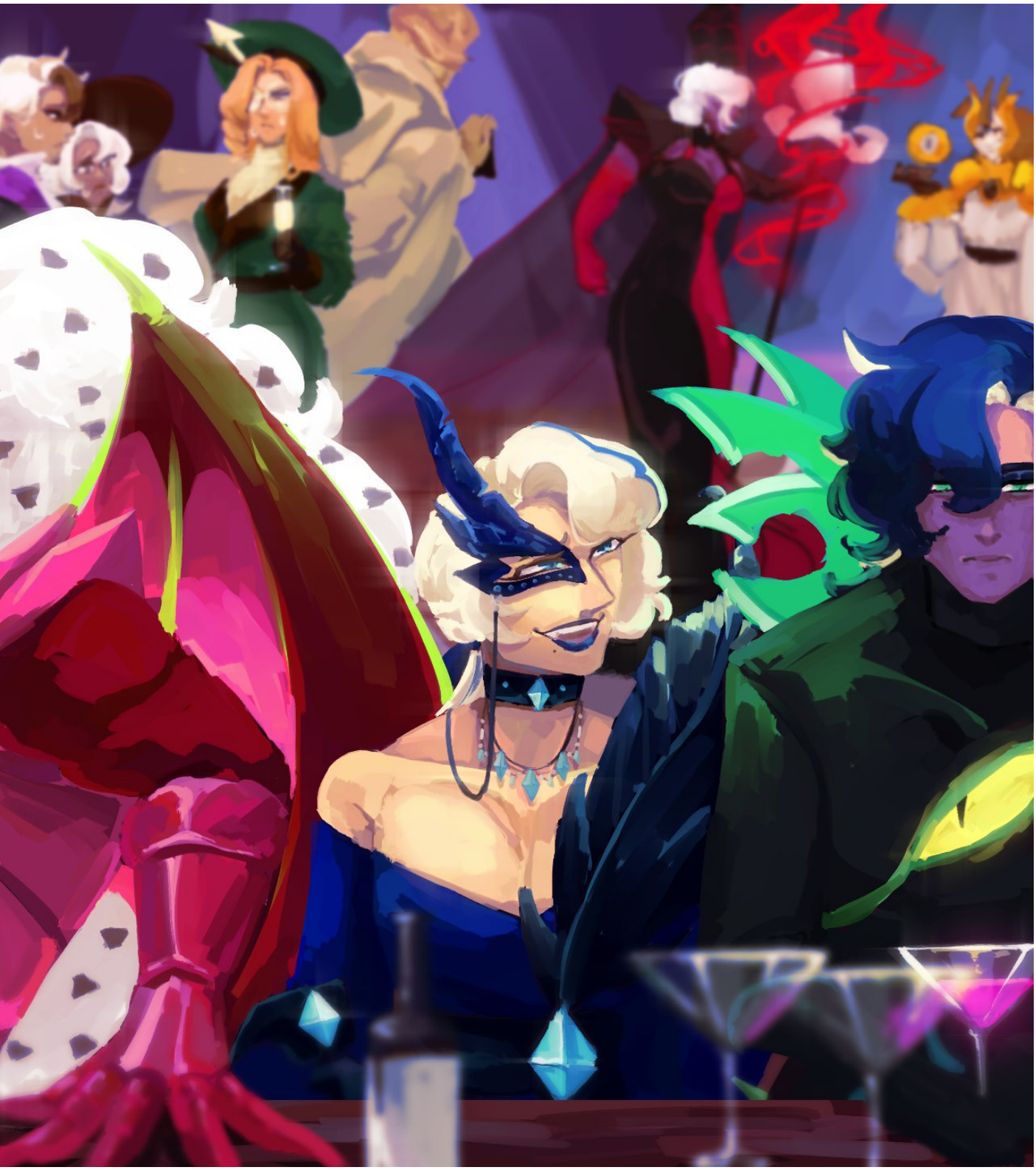
Icons *by ghostlymatte*

Emotes *by Rivericals*



Wallpaper *b*

by vanillamoontea



Live2D Model/VTuber Rig *by Ravensa*

Instructions are included in its ZIP archive!

Writers

*1 **Ellory** *p.17*
t thelocalmuffin AO3 yourlocalmuffin

*1 *2 **Taruchinator** *p.33 & p.206*
AO3 t taruchinator

HopeStoryteller *p.60 & p.130*
AO3 HopeStoryteller
t ofstormsandfire

*1 *3 **blitz** *p.79 & p.111*
dorilaron t bellakaviarno

*4 **Muffy** *p.95*
t mermaidzkiss AO3 cloudcore

*2 **Icy** *p.148*
t cure-icy-writes

*5 **Sunlight** *p.163*
AO3 gavinnersworldtour t sunlightbender

experimentaldragonfire *p.176*
t letapollojusticesayfuck
AO3 t experimentaldragonfire

Small illustrations by the fics' own authors, except for:

*1 #Paul | *2 #Ghozt | *3 #Aether | *4 #Victor Hannibal | *5: *Lira (pakutheta)*

Page Artists

Irusu *p.14 & p.147*
AO3 irusu

Clara Kay *p.15-16*
clarabellumsart

HeBe *p.28*
hevve_chan t hebedesu

tooblindtizzy *p.29 & p.160*
t tooblindtizzy

LittleR0b1n *p.30*
t LittleR0b1n

Feenie *p.31 & p.109*
t Feeniroir

Ogo0d4 *p.32*
Ogo0d4

Telebotz *p.41-42*
telebotz_ telebotz

NinooTNY *p.43-44 & p.161-162*
t Ninoo_TNY

Lynn *p.58*
justlynnstore wintermelynn
t shadowmatcha

Dreamaruu *p.59*
t Dreamaruu

ufokia *p.74*
t ufokia

falterview *p.75 & p.129*
falterview false_tart

ronanxing *p.76*
t ronanxing

PropertyOfHog *p.77*
t PropertyofHog

Hannah Spoons *p.78 & p.124*
t hannahspoonsart

Berri *p.90*
t snazzi-strawberri-artz

eggsy *p.91-92 & p.93-94*
t myxineye

Blue *p.105*
t Blueofthesunset

hyun *p.106*
h6332505815

Fictional Reality p.107
fu_fiction iifictional_realityii

Starix p.108
starphostrix

Shakooo p.110 & p.219-220
UJuanchis Shako_u
Shakooo

mariibeann p.123
mariibeann

atlas occam p.125
Occcam

Victor Hannibal p.126
briantheinsomniac vinegarhannibal

Lad p.127-128
lmnlad

Skunkoon p.144
Skunkoon _skunkoon_

calatarii p.171-172
calatarii

sabimila p.173-174
sabimilia

Cicadraa p.188
Cicadraa feralfruit32
Cicadra

DarkRainfire p.189
darkrainfire

MARLOWEMEMO p.190
marlowememo

applesteinie p.204
applesteinie

Kara p.205
karakaramalaise

Beabzebub p.217
beabzebub

MIRU667 p.221
miru667

Cosplayer

Millea Erell p.145-146 & p.218
I.wannabe.m.e MilleaErell

Merch

Uukipi p.222
uukipi

Tone p.223
Tonestar tonestarr
tinytonestar

ghostlymatte p.223
ghostlymatte

Rivericals p.224
rivericals

vanillamoontea p.225-226
vanillamoontea helixcraft

Ravensa p.227
ravensa ravensa.rah

Cover

Ceramic_avocado p.1
Ceramic_Avocado

Mods

p.45, p191, Writing, Organisation **Paul**
princepqul
pqulapollo.carrd.co
prince_pqul

p.170, Socials **Aether**
aeprism

p.175, Art, Socials **So**
helloim_tired

Art **Gavi**
gavinom.carrd.co

p.159, Graphics, Formatting **Ghozt**
ghozt.neocities.org

Thank You
Hear Me Out 2

N7
WAH!!!
TWINK

OP
ECRET